

Fenkata:

An Emblem of Maltese
Peasant Resistance?



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CARMEL CASSAR

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An Emblem of Maltese
Peasant Resistance?

MINISTRY FOR YOUTH
AND THE ARTS



233951

Publisher:

Ministry for Youth and the Arts

Author:

Carmel Cassar

Read for an M. Phil in Social Anthropology and for a Ph. D in Cultural History at the University of Cambridge.

He is a Fellow of the Cambridge Commonwealth Society and a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

He is currently in charge of the Etnographic collection with the Museums Department and lectures in History and Anthropology at the University of Malta.

He is author of a number of studies on Maltese cultural and ethno-history.

Photos:

Martin Abela, Carmel Cassar, Anthony P. Vella, Tony Terribile, Museum of Fine Arts, D.O.I., Godwin Xuereb and Noel Buttigieg

Technical and Editorial Assistance:

Arche' International Ltd.

Art Director:

Anthony P. Vella

With the co-operation of:

Nuccio Lo Castro

(Director of the Ethno-Anthropological Museum of St. Agata di Militello, Sicily)

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Abbreviations

ACM	Archives of the Cathedral, Mdina
AIM	Archives of the Inquisition, Malta
AO	<i>Acta Originalia</i>
Grim. Proc.	Criminal Proceedings
fol./s.	folio/folios
libr.	Library Manuscript Collection
NLM	National Library of Malta
p./pp.	page/pages
Univ.	<i>Universita'</i> Manuscript Collection
v.	verso

Early Modern Currency

6 piccoli or dinari	=	1 grano
5 grani	=	1 cinquina
2 cinque	=	1 carlino or 10 grani
2 carlini	=	1 tari or 20 grani
12 tari	=	1 scudo
30 tari	=	1 oncia or 2 ^{1/2} scudi

Grain Measurements

1 mondello	=	4 carozzi
1 tumulo	=	4 mondelli
1 bisaccia	=	4 tumoli
1 salma	=	4 bisacce
Salma of Licata	=	225 kgs
Salma of Malta	=	206 kgs

Preface

The present study owes its origins, to my M.Phil intensive course in social anthropology at the University of Cambridge and particularly to the very lively discussions I had, on the role of the peasantry, with my supervisor Chris Hann. The subject was so appealing that I decided to write a paper on peasant political action taking Malta as a case study. Unfortunately the project developed very slowly due to my teaching duties and other, more urgent, research commitments which prevented me from working constantly on the subject.

Then in 1990 I volunteered to give a course in History and Anthropology to History BA (Hons) and MA qualifying students at the University of Malta. Due to its very nature the course enabled me to develop several concepts on peasant societies, food, customs and mentality. In 1992 Paul Sant Cassia invited me to hold a public seminar on the origins of rabbit stew as a Maltese peasant dish. The theme was well received by academics and laymen alike, and for this reason the Ministry for Youth and the Arts showed interest to publish the study in the form of a monograph. The result, initially intended to be a very short paper, was developed into its present form.

I should like to thank Peter Burke and Chris Hann who as my supervisors at Cambridge, helped to develop my views on popular culture and the peasantry from a pan-European perspective. The economic anthropology seminars conducted by Keith Hart provided a useful general background. At the University of Malta sound advice was given by Jeremy Boissevain, Henry Frendo, Victor Mallia Milanes, Paul Sant Cassia and Peter Serracino Inglott. Thanks are also due to the Directors and staff of the National Library of Malta, the Cathedral Archives Mdina and the Malta University Library. A visit to Malta by the eminent Cambridge anthropologist Jack Goody, in April 1994, enabled me to develop further certain aspects of this study. I should also like to thank my friends Dominic Cutajar, Natalino Fenech, Tony Terribile and Dennis Vella who commented on various parts of the study while it was still in lecture form. For improvements on the penultimate version I am most grateful to my wife Susan and my sister Jacqueline. A word of thanks goes to the Hon. Dr Michael Refalo and Messrs. Godfrey Demarco and Emy Scieluna of the Ministry for Youth and the Arts without whose initiative this study would not have been published. Finally I should also like to thank Anthony P. Vella and Robert Farrugia, for their help and their attention to verbal and pictorial detail.

Msida
7th. July, 1994

Introduction

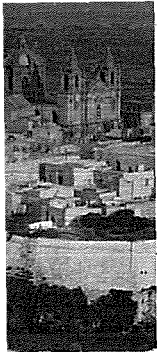
The process of shaping national culture often coincides with the production of traditions giving special meaning to an increasing number of elements of everyday life. This study discusses one example, relating to food, which seems older than the mass-production of traditions occurring during the nineteenth century.

Geographically, Malta is sufficiently compact to have its own distinct identity. Yet it was only under the rule of the Order of St. John that a 'Maltese' culture came into being, one in which the mass of the native population participated.

Prior to the Order's arrival, the Maltese islands had enjoyed a certain measure of autonomy as domainial towns of the Kingdom of Sicily. In fact both Malta and Gozo had their own *Universita'*, or local municipal government, responsible for collecting taxes, administering justice, regulating the market, especially the grain supply - as well as seeing to public health. Typical of the medieval polity, the *Universita'* played the role of representative assembly of the Maltese, theoretically immune from arbitrary treatment by the ruler. In reality, the *Universita'* was dominated and controlled by an elite group of landowners comprising the higher clergy, the landowning gentry, judges notaries and lawyers.

The advent of the Order led to a radical change of the institutional set up of the Maltese islands. The Grand Master ruled as feudal overlord. Yet the Maltese became so dependent on their ruler that by the time of Grand Master La Valette (1558-1568), the area that remained free of his control was indeed very narrow. In fact, the more intensively the Grand Master dominated the local administration, the more the Maltese shifted their allegiance from their *Universita'* to the Grand Master. The more energetically the Grand Master's sovereign rights were exercised, the more restrictions there were on all sorts of common customary rights.

In order to consolidate and extend their power, the later Grand Masters had to appropriate parts of the old system of authority and risk facing furious resistance as they did so. This authority was enforced and fully exercised by these Grand Masters who found themselves free to dictate matters on their authority as princes of Malta - a designation duly adopted by Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773). By then the sovereignty of the King of Sicily over Malta was exercised in name only.



During the later decades of the eighteenth century, inspite of the enlightened despotism practised by the Grand Masters these still strove, amongst other, to impose a stricter ban on hunting rights. The move aroused the hostility of the Bishop, who felt his status menaced, and thus, together with the relatively numerous clerics, began to put up signs of resistance. The quarrel manifested itself both as political opposition, as well as in the production of national symbols, most notably rabbit hunting as a right over common land and as a measure to control a species which represented a threat to the annual crops. Rabbit, as a traditional peasant meal, came to symbolize the struggle against the Order's government; at the same time its culinary preparation received a boost, so that it soon came to be considered a refined Maltese dish.

1. Daily Bread

In the culture of early modern society, common people dreamt of consuming meat, essentially because their diet consisted primarily of vegetable foods. Meat meant nourishment, a sophisticated taste and therefore status.¹ Yet diet remained pretty much based on grain-products, particularly for the lower classes who ate very little meat and depended heavily on the cultivation of grain.² Malta was no exception. The island depended so heavily on grain imports from Sicily, that this business provided an initiative to entrepreneurs, becoming the *raison d'être* of the *Universita'* (communes) of Malta and Gozo.³ Wettinger shows that during the late Middle Ages, 'Practically every year, large amounts of wheat and other cereals and pulses were imported from Sicily free of the Sicilian export duties'; nevertheless he still argues, 'farming provided a livelihood for peasants and formed the basis of the Maltese economy'.⁴

The available documentary records of the early modern period show that the *fenkata* was not recognized as a Maltese traditional dish. Travellers' reports from the 1530s onwards refer to bread as Malta's staple diet with no reference to rabbit. Quentin d'Autun points out that, 'Malta is very fortunate since it lies in the proximity of Sicily which is for the inhabitants as good a granary, where otherwise they would die of hunger'.⁵ The secretary of the Papal envoy, Mgr. Visconti, writing in 1582 reports that, 'the greater part of the people eat *pane misturato*, (bread made of a mixture of barley and wheat) vegetables and *latticini* (cheeses).⁶ During the latter part of the eighteenth century, Malta was still importing the greater part of its food supplies from Sicily.⁷

The notion that bread is, 'that staff of life which is the symbol of survival',⁸ is evinced in a number of Maltese idioms which refer to bread as a basic commodity without which it is believed that no one survives. Thus a well-off person is *hobzu mahbuz* (lit. his bread is baked); one who lost his job has *tilef*

¹ Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism*, Vol.I, p.104.

² *Ibid.*, pp.196-97.

³ Vassallo, 'Prices of commodities in Malta', p.56.

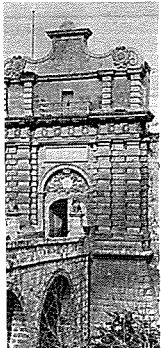
⁴ Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the late Middle Ages', p.3.

⁵ Quintin d'Autun, *The earliest description of Malta*, p.35.

⁶ Vianello, 'Una relazione inedita di Malta nel 1582', p.290; Falcone, 'Una "relazione inedita di Malta"', p.35.

⁷ Testa, *The life and times of Grand Master Pinto*, p.283.

⁸ Porter, 'Preface', in Camporesi, *Bread of dreams*, p.10.



ħobzu (lit. he lost his bread); when inquiring about someone's character the Maltese often ask, *x'ħobz jiekol dan?* (lit. what type of bread does he consume); and when badly in need of something they say, *jeħtiegu ħħall-ħobz li jiekol* (lit. he needs it like his daily bread); a profit making job is referred to as, *ħaga li fiħa bicca ħobz ġmielħa* (lit. something which provides a loadsome of bread), while a profitless task is often, *ma fiħiex ħobz* (lit. it procures no bread).⁹ Here the term *ħobz* (bread) is to be interpreted as much in the symbolic sense as in the factual sense. It depicts an inward looking system, strictly indicating that in Malta bread was a common denominator, consumed daily and well liked at all social levels.

We lack information on food consumed by artisans and peasants of early modern Malta, but bread with oil, anchovies and onions was clearly their most frequent meal. Baron Riedesel, who visited Malta in 1773 asserted that the Maltese still lived frugally on, 'bread, peppers, onions and anchovies'.¹⁰

Thirty years later L. De Boisgelin confirmed that, 'a clove of garlic, or an onion, anchovies dipped in oil, and salted fish', was 'their usual diet'.¹¹ The role of bread among the working classes did not lessen its appreciation by members of the elite. Bread was in fact graded and its quality sanctioned social distinctions. It represented a status symbol that defined human condition and class according to its particular colour. In short, bread represented a socio-economic position.¹² At a time when harvest failure meant famine and death, the poor were above all concerned with a cheap price for bread. Indeed, the regulation of prices was one of the most difficult jobs of any early modern government.¹³

Rabbits are casually mentioned by Mgr. Visconti's secretary who recalls that the Maltese bred chickens, lambs, goats and pigs which had a very good taste. Besides the island, *ħa di selvatico pernici assai, conigli e qualche lepře* (plenty of wild partridges, rabbits and some hares).¹⁴

The 1582 report refers also to the fertility of Gozo, *fertile abbondante e copiosa, non solo delle cose necessarie al vitto, ma di molte delizie ancora,*

⁹ **Fenech**, *Idjomi Maltin*, pp.39-40.

¹⁰ **Cavallero**, *The last of the Crusaders*, p.98.

¹¹ **De Boisgellin**, *Ancient and modern Malta*, pp.77-8.

¹² **Camporesi**, *Bread of dreams*, p.120.

¹³ **Thompson**, 'The moral economy of the English crowd', pp.76-136; **Tilly**, 'Food supply and public order', pp.395-96; **Vianello**, 'Prices of Commodities', pp.71-2.

¹⁴ **Vianello**, 'Una relazione inedita di Malta', p.292; **Falcone**, 'Una "Relazione di Malta"', p.36.

*perche abbonda di conigli, di lepri, di uccelli e di miele.*¹⁵ In a reference to Comino we are told that it was, *tutto dishabitato ma ripieno di conigli et dove si trova alle volte qualche cinghiale.*¹⁶

The reference to the presence of a large number of wild rabbits indicates that the rabbit was definitely eaten by the Maltese peasants. Nor was this peculiar to the Maltese. M. Montanari asserts that, during the High Middle Ages, wild rabbit was commonly found on all tables in Europe where often its meat was preferred to that of the hare.¹⁷ Yet as Braudel aptly points out 'game was normally for peasants and nobles'.¹⁸



¹⁵ 'fertile, abundant and plentiful not only with basic commodities but with many more delicacies, since it abounds in rabbits, hares, birds and honey'. **Falcone**, 'Una "relazione di Malta"', p.37; **Vianello**, 'Una relazione inedita di Malta', p.292.

¹⁶ 'uninhabited but full of rabbit and one can sometimes find some wild boar', *ibid.*

¹⁷ **Montanari**, *L'alimentazione contadina nell'alto medioevo*, p.274; **Delatouche**, *L'agriculture au Moyen Age*, p.523.

¹⁸ **Braudel**, *Civilization and capitalism*, I, p.197.

2. *Landlordship and Common Land*

Late medieval agricultural practice normally had a safety valve, in that alongside the relatively independent farm or leasehold, there were extensive usage rights of common pastures. These permitted the keeping of many more animals than would have been possible with the resources of one's own farmland alone. Such rights also produced stone for building and fencing, as well as grazing land, without forcing the peasant to draw on his own financial resources. According to G. Wettinger,

Malta had always possessed fairly large areas of karstic table-lands suitable only for very rough grazing. In the fifteenth century these areas, then still just about entirely enclosed were considered to be common property open to the animals of all... Every village seems to have been within reach of a stretch of such common land, and the importance of animal husbandry is well brought out by the records of their strenuous efforts to prevent the appropriation of portions of such land by private individuals.¹⁹

In the early sixteenth century, one could still state that there were extensive *spatii publici* (common land). Thus in 1536, J. Quentin d'Autun asserted that 'the fields here and there are full of stones, but grass springs up from beneath and because of this there is plenty of pasture for sheep'.²⁰ Nonetheless, protests directed against the alienation of public land were already documented in 1410.²¹ There is evidence that, 'Antoni Desguanez got into trouble in 1458 by his persistent efforts to appropriate and enclose, with royal permission, extensive portions of common land mostly in the north and west of the island'.²² Yet even where pasturage was precisely regulated, usage of common land was rarely restricted in any serious way.

By the late sixteenth century the situation had entirely changed. It is difficult to come across one peasant grievance list which neglected to demand emphatically hunting rights - with the usual agreement about damages by wild game - together with pasturage rights and the rights to graze on the *spatii*

¹⁹ Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta', p.31.

²⁰ Quentin d'Autun, *The earliest description of Malta*, p.39.

²¹ Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta', p.32.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.32-3.

publici. The case of Marco Bonello of Dingli brings to light evidence of the difficult times shepherds were facing at the turn of that century, and is therefore worth analysing in some depth.

Bonello used to take his sheep to pasture on the cliff called *ridum della magdalena* in the area of Dingli, a stretch of land, partly cultivated, that belonged to Martino Vella, an official of the Inquisition Tribunal. On one occasion two agricultural labourers of Vella, Andrea Zammit of Luqa and Lippo di Jorlando of Qrendi, saw sheep grazing on the spot and attempted to carry them off to the Holy Office. Bonello protested strongly at this effrontery, stating that the sheep were only grazing on public land. Lippo however insisted on 'imprisoning the sheep'. At this point Bonello retorted by throwing stones in the direction of the two labourers, adding that the *ridum* (cliff) belonged to the public, that the people intended to keep grazing their sheep in spite of anyone's insistence. He then turned his anger on Martino challenging him to look after his land personally. He further added a veiled threat, that if Martino were to turn up in the area, the people would throw him into the sea. In a fit of rage, Bonello sarcastically challenged the Inquisitor to favour Martino by giving him *la gran fontana* (the great fountain) and part of his revenue, and not what belonged to the public.²³

Bonello was promptly imprisoned by the Holy Office. He insisted arguing his point, even in front of Inquisitor Innocentio del Bufalo himself. Asked why he persisted in grazing his sheep in the area, Bonello asserted,

Io so che il detto terreno era publico perche ci pasceva lo et molti altri ci pascevano et da cinque anni in qua fu dato a Mario pachi dal gran maestro et poi... lo hebbe il detto capitano Martino et poi dal mese di maggio o giugno ando un bando che in detti terreni che altri volti erano del publico si returnassero un'altra volta al publico dopo la ricolta.²⁴

²³ AIM Crim Proc. Vol. 14A case 19, fol. 490: 24 January, 1596.

²⁴ 'I know that this land belonged to the public because I used to graze (my sheep) and many others used to graze (there) and five years from now it was given to Mario Pachi by the Grand Master and then... he said captain Martino acquired it (the land) and then in the month of May or June an edict was issued (which started) that the lands which in other times belonged to the public should return to the public after harvest time'. *Ibid.* fol. 492: 26 January, 1596.

The courageous stand taken by Marco Bonello did not leave the desired effect.²⁵ In the mid 1630s Don Filippo Borg, parish priest of Birkirkara retorted, *...questi spatii publici essendo della comunita' non si devon dare a quattro e cinque persone e levarsi al povero....*²⁶

One of the major motives for keeping the peasants out of the *spatii publici* seems to have been the lords' passion for hunting. The rise of a new propertied class, adjunct to the traditionally rich landowners, and usually tied to an urban background, led to further expropriation of public land at the expense of the peasants. Elite pastime conservation policies began cautiously in the fifteenth century, as the Antoni Desguanez case documents, but the practise expanded rapidly with the advent of the Order of St. John in 1530.

²⁵ Bonello was imprisoned for eight days by the Inquisition. He had to promise that he was ready to pay for the damages incurred before he was released. *Ibid.*, fol. 488: 31 January, 1596.

²⁶ '... this common land, belongs to the community and should not be allotted to four or five persons and removed from the use of the poor'. **Wettinger**, 'Early Maltese popular attitudes to the government of the Order', p.277.

3. *Hunting Restrictions*

The knights of St. John attached considerable importance to hunting. From time to time, the matter was discussed in the Council and regulations were issued.²⁷ The edict of 22 June 1530 was the first law regulating hunting enacted by the Order in Malta. Almost four months before the Order actually took possession of the islands.²⁸

Grand Master Del Monte (1534-1535) issued an edict prohibiting the hunting of partridge, hare and rabbit in Malta, Gozo and Comino.²⁹ Grand Master La Valette, the hero of the Siege of 1565, enforced the prohibition of rabbit hunting with special emphasis on Comino. Fierce punishments were inflicted on anyone who cut grass from that islet which served as fodder for the rabbits.³⁰

Thus by the middle of the sixteenth century, several Grand Masters had promulgated stiff regulations against hunting. With time, these decrees came to draw upon older customs and local regulations, but there can be no doubt that the Order's government interfered more massively with hunting laws. The edicts regulating hunting laws, published under the various Grand Masters, were in substance not very different from each other. They established closed seasons between December and July,³¹ declared that no one could hunt partridge, rabbit, hare or disturb their nests, and that no one could sell or buy protected species.³² By the eighteenth century, legislation and restrictions on hunting had reached unprecedented levels. A decree issued on 29 May 1776 enacted that hunting on privately owned land could only be practised by those who administered the area.³³

Hunting laws and their enforcement varied in severity, according, as one would expect, to the dire shortage of game. Yet often the hunting laws only masked the Grand Master's passion for hunting. Grand Master La Valette, for example, was particularly fond of falconry.³⁴ At other times, highly eminent

27 **Fenech**, *Fatal Flight*, pp.128-29.

28 *Ibid.*

29 NLM Libr. 149, p.162.

30 *Ibid.*

31 NLM Libr. 291, fol.34.

32 **Fenech**, *Fatal Flight*, p.128; **Mifsud**, 'Sulla caccia in Malta', p.116; NLM Libr. 149, pp.65-8, 70, 73, 89, 255; Libr. 641, fol.79; Libr.(1), fol.108.

33 NLM Libr. 429(6), fols.162, 293.

34 **Fenech**, *Fatal Flight*, p.23.





knights, as well as avid hunters, were concerned about the hunting habits of the population. Fra Marbeuf and Fra Remisching were such keen hunters that they kept a large quantity of rabbits and partridges in Gozo between 1738 and 1742.³⁵

Elite hunting policies were thus shaped by a mixture of several competing interests: - the growing scarcity of land due to its increasing profitability; the ever-growing population, 50,073 in 1658,³⁶ reaching 75,320 by 1740;³⁷ as well as the passion for hunting of subsequent Grand Masters.

Hunting rabbit was strictly prohibited and infringement of the law could be punished with galley-rowing. A few weeks before his death on 16 January 1660, Grand Master De Redin promulgated the regulation that anyone caught hunting or selling rabbit would be sentenced to pay 10 *oncie* (ounces equivalent to 25 scudi), or sent to row on the galleys for two years.³⁸ Grand Master De Clermont de Challes Gessan, who ruled for just four months, not only ratified De Redin's edict on his election,³⁹ but made even stricter rules on his deathbed, ensuring that anyone caught hunting with guns, nets, dogs or kept any kind of hunting equipment would be punished with two years on the galleys.⁴⁰

Later Grand Masters added further decrees to curb the indiscriminate hunting of rabbit. Grand Master Caraffa prohibited the hunting, selling and buying of rabbit,⁴¹ as repeated by Grand Master Zondadari.⁴² Whoever was caught contravening this rule had to pay a fine of ten *oncie*. Similarly, Grand Master Pinto applied stricter hunting prohibitions soon after his election in 1741. Whoever was caught hunting rabbit, hare and partridge, without the Falconer's licence, was punished with three years on the galleys or the payment fine of a twenty *oncie* (50 scudi).⁴³ Similar rules continued to be enacted with increasing severity right through his long reign.⁴⁴

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

³⁶ NLM Univ. 2, fols.156-66.

³⁷ **Brincat**, 'Language and demography in Malta', pp.97,99.

³⁸ NLM Libr. 149, fol.68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, fol.89: 18 February, 1660.

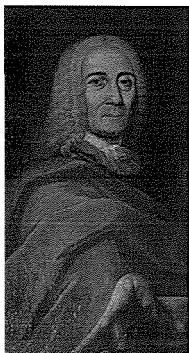
⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, fol.70: 1 June, 1660.

⁴¹ NLM Libr. 151, fol.106v: 11 September, 1681.

⁴² NLM Libr. 149, fol.255: 31 May, 1720.

⁴³ NLM Libr. 429(2), fol.143.

⁴⁴ See for example: NLM Libr. 429(3), fol.18 edicts of: 30 December, 1745; 2 January, 1747; 30 December, 1747; 9 January, 1749; 29 December, 1749. *Ibid.*, fol.132: edicts of: 10 July, 1752; 16 July, 1753; 13 July, 1754.



Matters seem to have reached saturation point in 1773. Immediately after his election, Grand Master Ximenes de Texada issued an edict prohibiting rabbit hunting and snaring.⁴⁵ The edict was taken badly by the peasants who feared that their crops would be ravished by the rodents.⁴⁶

These peasant complaints doubtless arose due to the excessive wildlife population of the Maltese islands, but also because, in an indirect way, game - particularly rabbit - provided a cheap and abundant supply of meat. Hunting prohibitions barred the peasants from practising this 'right' completely. In the countryside, stretches of wasteland were ideal for such wildlife as rabbits, hares, partridges and pigeons continued to multiply at an incredible rate.⁴⁷ The largely deserted north of the island was especially adapted for wildlife conservation as shown by an edict of 1639 issued by Grand Master Lascaris.⁴⁸ It also explains why in the mid sixteenth century, Grand Master La Valette built his hunting lodge and stables at the *Boschetto*, limits of Rabat, and not far from the area later protected by Lascaris. The *Boschetto* had become an ideal hunting locality ever since the later sixteenth century, when Grand Master Verdalle (1582-1595) had a fortified summer palace erected in the area close to La Valette's hunting lodge.⁴⁹

All this notwithstanding, the rural inhabitants held very different views about hunting. They considered small scale hunting activities, and whatever else nature had to offer, particularly dry thistle, snails and game, as nobody's property, and thus they were entitled to partake of the natural resources surrounding their homes. Very likely, absentee landlords and knights were regarded as intruders who 'appropriated' game belonging to the local people, the more so as wild animals fed from their crops. The peasants generally would not complain as rabbits, hares and partridges were the main quarry sought by hunters and these were often considered as pests that ravaged their fields.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ NLM Libr. 429(6), fols.16-17; NLM Libr. 1146(2), p.217: 14 February, 1773.

⁴⁶ **Fava**, 'Francesco Saverio Ximenes de Texada', pp. 43-4; **Panzavecchia**, *L'ultimo periodo della storia di Malta sotto il governo dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano*, p.46.

⁴⁷ **Mifsud**, 'Sulla caccia in Malta', p.116.

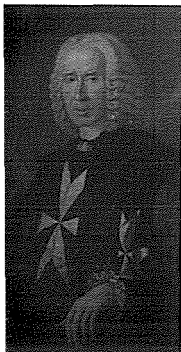
⁴⁸ *Nessun ardischi di andare a caccia senza licenza del falconiere in Fiddien cosi come gira per il territorio di bingemma, del Santi, Torre Falca, e S. Nicola sotto pena d'esilio...* (No one should dare to go hunting without the falconer's licence in Fiddien as well as the nearby territory of Bingemma, Santi, Torre Falca and S. Nicola, whoever disobeys is threatened by banishment from Malta), NLM Libr. 149, p.65.

⁴⁹ **Abela**, *Della descrizione di Malta*, p.63.

⁵⁰ Andrea Zammit and Lippo di Jorlando had intentionally gone to the *ridumi della magdalena* in order to chase rabbits from the fields of the Captain of the Inquisition

This mentality is clearly evinced in the dialogue between a farmer and a hunter (*cacciatore*) reported by G.P.F. Agius De Soldanis in his second edition of *Della Lingua Punica*.⁵¹ The dialogue provides an insight on the way rabbit-hunting was perceived by Maltese peasants at large.⁵² The author, a priest of Gozitan stock and therefore close to peasant-needs, reconstructs a dialogue which he may have frequently attended to in everyday life. In this way, he provides us with a unique insight of hunting methods and the mode of behaviour among hunters and farmers of the mid eighteenth century.

The hunter, who goes in search of rabbit with the aid of a ferret, tells the farmer that another hunter had just caught a large number of rabbits in the area (over fifty in fact!). He then tells the farmer that he doubts whether there were any more left around. The farmer reassures him and replies, *Qatt jintemm dan in-nisel! Hela kull ma sab f'wicc l-art*.⁵³ Aware of the difficulties farmers were facing at the time, Agius De Soldanis allows his farmer to air commonly held views further by stating that around a thousand rabbits are killed daily, and that the hunter should opt instead for hares and partridges. The farmer ends his discourse by suggesting that if by chance the hunter were to pass by after the hunt, and maybe present him with a rabbit, he would readily oblige.⁵⁴



tribunal, Martino Vella. Evidence given by the Andrea Zammit: 24 January, 1596. AIM Proc. Crim Vol. 14A case 19, fol.487v.

⁵¹ This second amplified edition of the *Della lingua Punica*, first published in Rome (1750), is preserved in manuscript form at the National Library of Malta as NLM Libr.144.

⁵² Although **Agius De Soldanis** calls the hunter *cacciatore*, it would have been more appropriate to call him a trapper. It may be assumed that the great majority of shooters (i.e. those who hunted with muskets) were either members of the Order of St. John, or members of the Maltese elite. Hunting with a gun was definitely an expensive 'sport' making trapping and snaring more popular among the peasants even though regulations refer to hunting at large. The elite continued to oppose hunting regulations until the early twentieth century. This explains why Fenech was able to assert: 'those opposing bird protection were, as usual, shooters, mainly from the upper classes'.

Fenech, Fatal Flight, p.130.

⁵³ 'Will this kind ever perish! It has ruined all the crops'. NLM Libr. 144, fol.194v.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

4. *The Economic Crisis of 1772-1775*

Agius De Soldanis seems to have sensed the disturbances which were to take place some years after he wrote his dialogue. Food shortages became acute during the 'reign of austerity' of Grand Master Ximenes de Texada (1773-1775), essentially due to a long period of economic mismanagement. Already in 1728, Grand Master Vilhena had appropriated the funds of the *Massa Frumentaria* - whose job it was to import duty free grain and subsidize other foodstuffs - to finance the building of a palace at Mdina and repair that town's fortifications. Fava points out that

Successive Grand Masters had followed suit, and by 1741 the sum thus appropriated had reached almost half a million scudi. During Pinto's rule the debts incurred were astronomical... the *Massa Frumentaria* rarely had any cash in hand to make the usual wheat purchases from Sicily... Out of season purchases had to be made at prohibitive prices or not made at all and the... *tratte* (the special, reduced tariff quota of grain conceded to the Maltese commune and the Order from Sicily) of 20,000 *salme* were at times forfeited.⁵⁵

The agitation and concern over food supplies subsided with the election of Grand Master Ximenes in 1773. He had frequently given assurances to the people upon his election to the Grand Mastership, that he would effect reform in the administration and reduce the cost of living. But faced with a depleted treasury, and unable to fulfill his promises, he resorted to a very unwise economic policy. In his scheme of reform, he thought he could provide an alternative to bread, which was scarce and dear.⁵⁶ He issued an edict in February 1773, forbidding the hunting of rabbits for a time to allow them to breed in order to secure an abundance of cheap meat.⁵⁷

The measures enforced by Grand Master Ximenes continued to be adopted in times of crises when "alternative" meats were the only ones obtainable well into the twentieth century. P. Camporesi points out that in Italy 'rabbits played

⁵⁵ Fava, 'A reign of austerity: economic difficulties during the rule of Grand Master Ximenes', p.43.

⁵⁶ Callus, *The rising of the priests*, p.17.

⁵⁷ NLM Libr. 429(6), fols.16-17; NLM Libr. 1146(2), p.217: 14 February, 1773.

a pivotal role in fascist food policy before and during the war'. Furthermore, we also learn that 'the rabbit... had previously been unexpectedly popular during the First World War, it was a rapidly produced animal which could give "immediate relief" to the consumer already oppressed by the enormous rise in prices of all foods'.⁵⁸

This measure caused widespread indignation and brought forth protests from the people, including most of the clergy. A ban on hunting was issued in January 1774 at which the Bishop, Mgr. Pellerano (1770-1780), expressed his alarm about the harm done to his estates by the great number of rabbits. In a high-handed way, and without the prior authority of the Grand Master, he permitted his master mason and some priests to go hunting for rabbit. The Grand Master complained that his authority was being prejudiced and demanded that the disobedience should cease.⁵⁹

It would be difficult to deny that the 'precipitants' or 'triggers' of the politico-religious conflict, coupled with the government's austere economic policies, created an atmosphere of political instability.⁶⁰ The people in particular felt particularly effected, for the cost of living had spiralled, while Ximenes' economic measures were causing social and economic grievances, notably the excessively high price of grain intended to make up for the debts of the *Massa Frumentaria*.⁶¹ Following the January 1774 ban on rabbit hunting, incidents involving game-wardens, priests and the Bishop's exemptees were on the increase.⁶² The clerics in fact were leading a campaign of civil disobedience which culminated in the so-called Rising of the Priests of 8 September 1775.⁶³

A number of discontented priests, led by Don Gaetano Mannarino, grasped the opening afforded by the troubles that this squabble had generated to attempt an open insurrection. On 9 September 1775, whilst the Order's navy was away raiding Algiers, the rebels - comprising a small group of priests and a few supporting clerics and laymen - surprised the small garrison of Fort St. Elmo and occupied the stronghold. They immediately lowered the Order's flag and hoisted the red and white colours of the Maltese *Universita'*, symbol of a free Maltese state. The conspirators had probably anticipated a popular uprising, which would have been difficult to suppress without the help of the navy, but in this they were disappointed. Consequently the rebellion was

⁵⁸ **Camporesi**, *The magic harvest*, p.159.

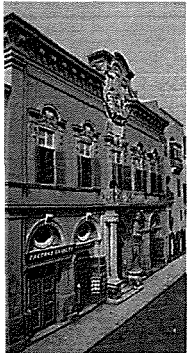
⁵⁹ **Callus**, *The rising of the priests*, p.17.

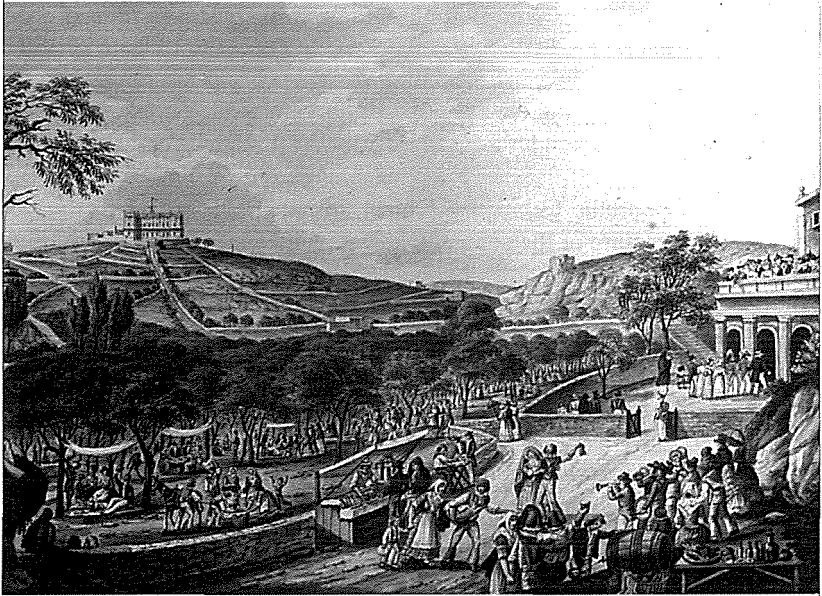
⁶⁰ **Fava**, 'A reign of austerity', pp.47-52.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁶² **Callus**, *The rising of the priests*, p.18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*





quickly suppressed and several ring leaders executed, or given long jail sentences.⁶⁴

Conservation laws, intended to limit peasant rights to hunting and grazing over the *spatii publici*, led to a large increase in the population of wild game which proved harmful to the crops and the good management of the land. There is no way to determine how the peasants' needs could still be completely supplied under those restrictions, but there is indirect evidence that sometimes peasants did have to breed game as a source of meat and possibly even rabbits.⁶⁵ Meanwhile although wildlife conservation was directed at the preservation and increase of game stocks, one unintended consequence turned out to be severe damage to crops by rabbits, hares, partridges and other game. Peasants could only solve the problem by cutting back on game population. Thus the major excuse to hunt was based on the presumption that game, particularly rabbits, damaged their crops.

Rabbit hunting among peasants in eighteenth century Malta could have well developed as a form of individual self-help termed by J.C. Scott as,

low profile techniques (which) are admirably suited to the social structure of the peasantry- a class scattered across the countryside, lacking formal organisation... Their individual acts as foot dragging and evasion, reinforced by a venerable popular culture of resistance and multiplied many thousand fold, may, in the end, make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by their would be superiors in the capital.⁶⁶

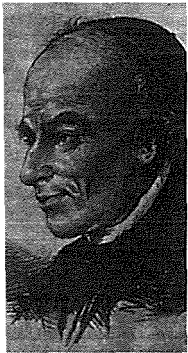
But such attitudes to the notion of collective rights on the part of the peasants clashed with the private hunting rights claimed by the Grand Masters, members of the Order and the Maltese elite. By protecting the rights of the elite and the holding of hunting privileges, the state had declassified peasant hunting and snaring as theft to be severely punished by law.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-76.

⁶⁵ **Cassar Pullicino** refers to a proverb which provides evidence that rabbits were bred at the home, '*Ma' fenka mghammra, lesti l-kennur bil-ġamra*, which may be literally translated: 'when you have a pregnant rabbit, get live coal in the fireplace' meaning that in a short time you will be able to eat rabbits since the pregnancy period of rabbits is short. *Studies in Maltese folklore*, p.170.

⁶⁶ **Scott**, 'Weapons of the weak', p.343.

⁶⁷ Penalties for snaring and hunting were so severe that a male could be sent to row on the galleys or pay a large sum of money, while women and young lads could be



Nevertheless, in rural settings, the boundary between legal and illegal activities was differently drawn, as the Agius De Soldanis dialogue demonstrates. By local standards, it was neither legal nor illegal to make use of natural resources, rather it was considered legitimate. Thus in 1772, Count Ciantar remarked that Maltese rabbits, especially hares, were tastier than those found either in Sicily or Italy. He further adds that the popularity of rabbit meat was so great that it was even sold at the Valletta market for two or three scudi and sometimes for a higher price.⁶⁸

Possibly, the efforts of falconers or game-keepers to combat hunting were interpreted as directed against the local community as a whole. It might have been even implied that the threat of punishment was so strong that people felt they had to rebel against it. Although it is doubtful whether the severe penalties were ever enforced, one might assume that the building up of tension may have favoured the outbreak of the rebellion of 1775. And it might also explain the proclamation issued on 19 May, 1776 allowing hunting for rabbits with any sort of arms and equipment, provided it was not carried out in private reserves.⁶⁹

flogged, imprisoned or even banished from Malta. The edict of 3 January, 1774 increased the penalty for hunting rabbit, hare and partridge to five years rowing on the galleys. Women and lads were to be flogged and sent to six months in prison or else they had to pay fifty *oncie* (125 *scudi*) to the Treasury. Furthermore, whoever was caught in possession of such game or intended to sell it had to pay twelve *oncie* (30 *scudi*). NLM Libr. 429(6), fols.15-16.

⁶⁸ Ciantar, *Malta illustrata*, Vol. I, pp.391-92.

⁶⁹ NLM Libr. 429(6), fol.162. This edict was re-enacted on 20 July, 1779 (see *ibid.*, fol.293) but hunting of partridge, pigeon and hare was still prohibited and punished with three years on the galleys.

5. How did Fenkata Originate?

There seems to be no indication of how a meal consisting of rabbit meat came into being. Yet it is now possible to appreciate how the early modern Maltese preferred to cook it.

Thanks to the evidence of Mastro Vincentio Azupard, we gain a clear picture of how rabbit meat was prepared and eaten at the turn of the seventeenth century. The Apulian painter Gio. Mattheo Stagno is depicted as an exceptionally greedy individual who was *grasso* (fat) and consumed all sorts of food. He had a particular craving for meat which he ate even during Lent-time.

On one occasion he scandalized his companions amongst whom the Florentine painter Philippo Paladini, Mastro Vincentio Azupard and the Greek Papas Janni, since he consumed *pezzi di coniglio e pasticci di carne* (pieces of rabbit and meat pastries).⁷⁰ Later, Stagno explained to the Inquisitor that he ate meat since it was prescribed by his physician. Stagno pointed out that he was a 'familiar' of Grand Master Verdalle (1582-1595) and continued to receive *la pitanza* (the pittance) for twelve years, until the death of that Grand Master.⁷¹ The 'pittance' was in reality food left over from the Grand Master's table which was then distributed to the familiars by the *Mastro di Casa* (house steward) of the Palace. This means that the food had to be taken away and therefore, as the evidence given by Azupard seems to suggest, must in all probability have consisted of *pasticci di carne* (meat pastries or pies).

Further evidence of consumption of rabbit-meat pies emerges in the case of Claretta Sguro. In 1603 Sguro was accused of having entered into the property of the noble Antonio Inguanes in the village of Dingli, together with a group of friends. The party had a meal consisting of meat, cheeses and eggs - on lean days prohibited by the Catholic Church. Sguro said in her evidence that she was the only one who had such a meal, and insisted that she ate meat out of necessity, since it was prescribed by the doctor and approved by the Vicar General of the diocese. She reported to have consumed *un pastizzo de*



⁷⁰ AIM Proc. Crim. Vol. 14A case 2, fol.24: 28 August, 1595.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, fol.36: 31 August, 1595.

carne de coviglio (a pie with filling consisting of rabbit meat), some eggs and some *ricotta* (cottage cheese).⁷²

Modern Maltese society often associates the eating of rabbit meat with the agricultural festival held on the eve of the feast of saints Peter and Paul, traditionally known as *Mnarja*, and celebrated at *Boschetto*, in the limits of Rabat. On this occasion, Maltese peasants congregate in the *Boschetto* and spend the night dancing and enjoying themselves, 'in a part of the garden where there was a very spacious grotto'.⁷³ This area, still central to the *Mnarja* festive activities, was already immensely popular in the late eighteenth century, as De Boisgelin recalls in 1804. There is no reference which suggests that the celebrants ate any rabbit meat. Yet we are told that 'each family was seated under a tree, and partook of a meal, the principal dish of which was a pie'.⁷⁴ Possibly in 1804 rabbit meat was still being eaten in the form of a pie rather than stewed, or fried as we commonly do today.

Although writers of the early British period, like De Boisgelin make no reference to the popularity of rabbit meat, it seems that the British facilitated hunting activities as soon as they set foot on Malta. Thus a decree dated 30 January 1801 enumerated five privileges that were to be granted to those who joined the militia. One of these allowed volunteers to carry a musket for hunting purposes without having to apply for a permit.⁷⁵ The edict seems to have remained in force despite the fact that two years later the Secretary of the Royal Commissioner directed, in another edict, that the old hunting laws were to remain in force.⁷⁶

The fact that militiamen were allowed to carry guns meant that they could hunt at will. By 1838, G.P. Badger was able to assert that the main pastime of young men seems to have been that of shooting birds.⁷⁷ Rabbit hunting would

⁷² *Ibid.*, Vol. 21B case 178, fol.536v.: 18 June, 1603.

⁷³ **De Boisgelin**, *Ancient and modern Malta*, I, p.91. **Cassar Pullicino** asserts that **De Boisgelin** gave an almost verbatim translation of the **Comte de Saint Priest's** account who in 1791 mentioned the night carousal at the *Boschetto*. Yet both **Aglus De Soldanis** and **Count Ciantar** 'specify that it was only after the ceremony at the Mdina Cathedral on the morning of the feast that the people made their way to *Boschetto*, where they feasted, sang and danced until it was time for them to return and watch the races'. **Cassar Pullicino**, 'Documentary material relating to *L-Imnarja*', p.14.

⁷⁴ **De Boisgelin**, *ibid.*

⁷⁵ **Fenech**, *Fatal Flight*, pp. 129-30.

⁷⁶ NLM Libr. 430(1), fol.217: 5 February, 1803.

⁷⁷ **Badger**, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, p.306.

have been an obvious pastime which did not have to wait for the migratory seasons.

One presumes that rabbit-meat continued to serve as the most available source of meat for peasants at a time when there was a sharp lowering of the standard of living.⁷⁸ It might be that with the dwindling of the rabbit population in the countryside, the peasants, took to the breeding of rabbits, as suggested by the proverb,⁷⁹ a custom which might also have spread to the urban lower classes during the nineteenth century.

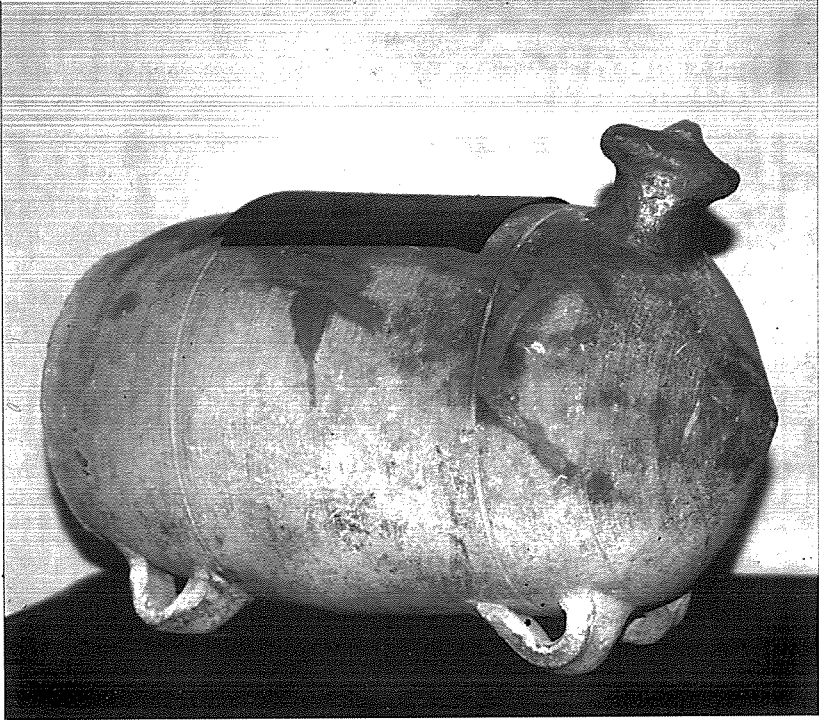
The availability of rabbit meat to all social levels seems to have enabled *fenkata* (rabbit stew) to become the acceptable meat dish to all Maltese, particularly to the rural population. This situation may have prompted a correspondent of 'The Daily Malta Chronicle' to write in 1930 that, '...For very many years the breeding and rearing of rabbits has been regarded as an occupation, bordering on a pastime... the breeding of rabbits for food consumption is common with the peasantry of most countries...'.⁸⁰ It also explains the relative popularity of rabbit hunting in modern times. A parliamentary question to the Minister of the Interior in May 1994 indicates a total of 294 licences for wild rabbit hunting in Malta and Gozo.



⁷⁸ According to **Padre Carlo Giacinto**, in 1811, the Maltese worker was receiving 18d a day; by 1842, he received the equivalent of 6 1/2d. **Davy**, *Notes and observations on the Ionian islands and Malta*, Vol. I, pp. 416-17.

⁷⁹ See note 65.

⁸⁰ 'The breeding of Chincilla rabbits - enterprise of local amateurs', p.4. (*Information kindly supplied by Mr. N. Fenech*).



6. *The Introduction of the Potato plant*

Fenkata with potatoes is not an ancient preparation, but a fairly new variety of the dish. As has already been shown - before the inclusion of potatoes - rabbit meat was probably served in the form of a pie which could be conveniently carried around. Evidence discussed above suggests that the original pie dish was not exclusively prepared by peasants, but they were probably responsible for adding potatoes to *fenkata*, very likely in the later part of the nineteenth century. This was a time when the potato itself had only just become a staple food in the diet of the Maltese.

The entry of potatoes into the Maltese diet was slow and difficult. It took a long effort of persuasion on the part of the British authorities and several Maltese and foreign agronomists before potatoes - brought to Europe by the Spaniards in the late sixteenth century and adopted by the English at the turn of the seventeenth century - began to be cultivated.

The potato plant seems to have been introduced by the Bailiff Argotti, a dignitary of the Order of St John, who established the Argotti botanic gardens in 1774.⁸¹

Under British rule, Maltese agriculture underwent a number of profound changes, encouraged by the authorities concerned to increase Malta's food supply. New crops were therefore introduced in an attempt to solve the problem permanently. Cassar Desain asserts that it was Alexander Ball who introduced the potato as a cash crop and staple food around 1803. He chose a few farmers probably, from the Zejtun or Ghaxaq area, and practically forced them to try the 'new' plants.⁸² The resulting crop was sold on the farmers' behalf by Ball to the Victualling Office at an extremely high price. Potatoes turned out to be a very valuable staple food for the British navy in the Mediterranean, then blockading most of the important Mediterranean ports.



⁸¹ Cassar Desain, *Il solanium tuberosum e la doryphora decemlienata*, p.7.

⁸² ... *la prima insistente, coraggiosa, audace spinta dovea esser data dal primo governatore inglese, Sir Alexander Ball, quasi preludio di futuri maggiori vantaggi agricoli e commerciali. Egli difatti... forzo' il luogotenente del Zejtun, o del Asciak come altri dicono, a propagar questa pianta. Ibid.*

However, although the potato crop found a ready market, and above all, it also grew well, it still took some time to find favour with the Maltese farmers.⁸³

Padre Carlo Giacinto, Professor of Botany at the University of Malta wrote in 1811 that while potato cultivation was widespread in Europe and America, in Malta it was only introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁸⁴

Until as late as the 1850s, there was no trace of the culinary use of the potato. By the time of the first Agrarian Exhibition held on 29th June 1854, the potato appears to have been quite a rarity in Maltese agriculture. It found only one exhibitor, a Giuseppe Bartolo from Mellieha. Since on the occasion no prizes were awarded, the standard of the product could not have been very high.⁸⁵ Over the years the popularity of the potato seems to have increased steadily, and by the second half of the nineteenth century farmers were already growing two crops per year. By then, the potato was well launched to replace the traditional cumin seed and cotton as Malta's cash crops.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁸⁴ **Giacinto**, *Saggio di agricoltura*, p.7

⁸⁵ **Calleja**, *Rapporto sulle esibizioni agrarie*; **cf. Cachia**, 'Potatoes - Malta's cash crop', p.12.

⁸⁶ **Cachia**, *ibid.*, pp.12-13. By 1920 it could be argued that 'potatoes are the most important crop on the island'. **Dawson Shepherd**, *Report on the agriculture in Malta*.

Conclusion

Fenkata may be taken as an example of how peasant customs spread during a period that coincided with the shaping of Maltese ethnic awareness. Rabbit-stew seems to have been taken up out of the fear of food shortages, that often gave rise to what J.C. Scott terms a 'subsistence ethic'- an ethic developed in response to living close to the margin.⁸⁷

J. Cassar Pullicino attempts to list traditional Maltese food based on evidence supplied by Maltese intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, notably Agius De Soldanis, Ciantar, Vassalli and Caruana. Yet the eminent folklorist found no evidence of any ordinary dishes which the modern Maltese consider traditional.⁸⁸ Possibly *fenkata* may have been deliberately chosen to characterize one of the ways in which the Maltese differed from the Knights, at a time when even the Maltese elite treated the latter with polite disdain.⁸⁹ Still, until the early nineteenth century, visitors to Malta - like Badger and MacGill - make no reference to its preparation as a peasant meal.⁹⁰

Although sources reporting the eating habits of the period are not plentiful, the discovery and adoption of rabbit stew, as a symbol of a Maltese culture, did not prompt the elite to introduce it in their own menu. Yet the role given to *fenkata* during the troubles of 1775 had not fallen into oblivion.



⁸⁷ Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant*, p.2.

⁸⁸ Agius De Soldanis, NLM Libr. 143(1) entitled '*Damma tal kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal maltin u ghaucin*'; Vassalli, *Ktyb yl klym*; Ciantar, *Malta illustrata*, pp.771-76; Caruana, *Vocabolario della lingua maltese*; Cassar Pullicino, *Studi di tradizioni popolari maltesi*, p.67.

⁸⁹ NLM Libr. 1202, fol.196. The Library manuscript is a treatise by Count Camillo Spreti written in 1760.

⁹⁰ MacGill, *A guide for strangers visiting Malta*; Yet Badger asserts that 'Fowls, turkies, ducks, geese, rabbits and other domestic birds and animals are always found on the market', p.59. Possibly the Maltese continued to prepare meat pies well into the nineteenth century, a dish which continues to enjoy some form of popularity in Malta though definitely not as much as rabbit stew.

At present rabbit-stew keeps its high status in popular festivals, whilst it remains an ordinary delicacy in both town and countryside.⁹¹ Modern folklorism has made use of *fenkata* for the tourist industry. Furthermore since the 1970s, the catering industry has made the most of it as a prominent feature of the Maltese cuisine in international tourism. The leading Maltese dramatist, Francis Ebejer, has even symbolically dedicated one of his plays to the major role of *fenkata* in the traditional peasant festival of Mnarja.⁹² Food and taste, of course, are not only part of national symbolism, but evident means of pinpointing national identity. In this way, the use of *fenkata* amongst Maltese emigrants has greater symbolic significance. *Fenkata*, which is a stew, is especially suitable for such a role in the United States, Canada and Australia, where steak dominates the meat dishes. The development is particularly significant, as it was under the British, during the more acute phase of national self-identification, that *fenkata* appears to have become synonymous with Maltese culture.

⁹¹ *Fenkata* is nowadays considered as the Maltese dish par excellence by all Maltese including the *nouveau riche* and the *bourgeoisie*. The latter continue to associate the dish with a few particular out of the way villages 'to dine at a restaurant in one of the villages... *Ma nafx fejn ezat*'. Yet they sometimes link such restaurants, very often without cause, with the suspicious adulteration of meat, or rather the culinary preparation of 'stray cats' instead of rabbits. See for example: 'Mariella's diary', *The Malta Independent*: 15 August, 1993.

⁹² **Ebejer**, *L-Imnarja zmien il-qtil*.

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CARMEL CASSAR

**Fenkata:
An Emblem of Maltese
Peasant Resistance?**

MINISTRY FOR YOUTH AND THE ARTS