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# THE POSSESSION OF TITLES AND FORMS OF ADDRESS IN EARLY MODERN MALTA

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*Abstract - This work seeks to explore the usage of titles and protocol that existed in Malta in early modern times. References found in the parish registers to titles, though sparse, have yielded the source material for this paper's study and permitted an analysis of the social classes in the epoch of the Knights. In studying families over generations, it became possible to provide a panorama of the evolutionary process behind the changes in the social tiers. The society of the old regime was definitely less rigid than it is often portrayed. More importantly, the paper will analyse the political implications behind the usage of titles. The employment of flamboyant titles reflected similar fashions abroad. Yet, behind the formality and exhibitionism of certain forms of address, there lay a covert political message, in the form of a passive resistance against the foreign aristocratic rulers of Malta.*

## Introduction

Any researcher probing the study of sociological tiers faces a critical impasse. The measurement of elitism varies from one academic discipline to another. However, the investigation of the subtle differences behind the definition of this term is not the purpose of this paper. Social theory will only serve here as a vehicle for the analysis of Malta's past society in terms of *strata*, while the parish acts, in particular those of the harbour cities, will furnish the historical data. Evidence of social diversity will be based on the use of titles, as employed in the acts. The simple fact that the parish registers comprised all the parish community, without any distinction of class or race, makes them uniquely useful in the delineation of hierarchical patterns. This consideration is of course not free from the element of bias or error. Any resulting pattern for the meaning of "elite" depends on how the clergy perceived this term at the time of writing. The implications will be then analysed in the context of individual cases, and anchored in a study of idiosyncratic histories of families that nurtured a consciousness of their social standing.

## The Maltese social arena: a historical perspective

It goes without saying that the Marxist precept of class links elitism to personal wealth. Building on this Marxist concept, Carlo Cipolla has convincingly argued that the general practice of peasants to hoard the little profits they made is a reason for their past social inertia.<sup>1</sup> In other words, liquidity underpins much of present day mobility. However, as I shall be arguing herein, this is not necessarily the case with the society of early modern times. The democratisation process of European

society, the acceleration of industrial development and the creation of financial centres have all facilitated mobility that went beyond the traditional social framework. Introducing paper money increased the fluidity in capital exchange, making it easier for the *sans culottes* (i.e., the labouring poor) to break the chains of poverty. The concepts of power and domination that for centuries had conditioned the political evolution along social lines were finally redefined.

Marc Bloch has amply shown that in the medieval world, land was the asset that determined all existing socio-economic relationships.<sup>2</sup> Tailor-made sales, where the buyer was often related to the vendor, and marriage patterns, where the bride was contracted to the bridegroom with an eye to consolidating a family's property, sustained the land's inherent character as prime security. This ultimately supported an ownership system that safeguarded the possession of land by distinguished households thereby guaranteeing that social status would remain within the same family from generation to generation. In such a context, social mobility could only occur over the centuries.

This rigid system began to be undermined in the sixteenth century. A number of dissertations that are currently being carried out at undergraduate level by history students at the University of Malta have demonstrated the new opportunities that opened up in Malta by the arrival of Hospitallers in 1530. Social progress was already visible in the first decades of the Order's rule. A new "gentility" began to make its presence felt in the social arena, whose fortunes were not tied to land.

The next factor to interrupt the rather linear process of status descent was the religious reforms undertaken by the Church. Local ecclesiastical efforts to update the Maltese diocese to the Council of Trent's decrees brought about a new bureaucratic class. It clearly appears from the apostolic visit of 1575, that the late medieval system behind the ordination of priests was based on money and connections. Many of the old priests interviewed by the apostolic visitor declared that they had been ordained abroad. When their level of education was analysed, many were found to be illiterate or semi-illiterate. This had two significant consequences. Firstly, despite the lack of education many were still making it to the priesthood. Secondly, it was largely the sons of opulent families that could afford to join the clergy. They had the means to pay for the necessary travel and ordination expenses. Efforts to rectify this situation emphasised the advantages of education. After Trent, learning became a fundamental requisite in the making of priests. In itself, this change indirectly conditioned the family set-up. Various forms of nepotism associated with the Roman Catholic clergy propelled family advancement, as once a member of a family made it to the priesthood, more often than not, he would transmit the educational values to his siblings and next of kin. Yet these reforms still had a very limited effect. They affected only a small number of families. The masses continued to be deprived of a rudimentary form of education.

During the Renaissance, education started to be considered as an asset in the social sphere. One can here recall Baldassare Castiglione's work, *Il Cortegiano*, to

gauge the changes made in perceptions of class during this epoch. Manners and education in general became important requisites in the social formation of princes. They contributed to cultural distinctiveness, lending flamboyance to cultural elitism. However, few families succeeded in harvesting any benefit out of these cultural changes. Change affected only a very small fraction of the European population, calculated at about two per cent. Society had to await other dramatic events, in particular industrialisation, the French Revolution, and the rise of the political parties, to have the centuries-old social inertia broken.

The French historian Roland Mousnier has portrayed a stratified image of Europe's past society<sup>3</sup> in which culture played a dominant role. It mirrored the image projected by society in early modern times. At the upper layer of the *société d'ordre*, as Mousnier loved to call it, lay the aristocracy and the high Church prelates. At the top sat the king, and a set of hierarchical rules kept harmony and descending order among his nobles. The town dwellers or the people of the 'bourg' represented by ecclesiastics, administrators, government and ecclesiastical clerks, skilled craftsmen and merchants, predating our present-day bourgeoisie, formed the middle strata. Finally, there were the *rustici* peasants and the commoners. Such a division lacks an important substratum – the frail group of bandits and slaves. Alexander Cowan incorporated them within the class of commoners; however such a classification seems inappropriate in the case of Malta.<sup>4</sup> Society itself failed to consider them as an integrated part of its structures. They were outcasts and had no place even at the bottom of the social scale. One can rightly say that slaves and bandits constituted a separate caste; they expressed a class that was acknowledged with the law of social exclusion. The slaves, for example, were equivalent to property that could be transacted at the owner's will. They could not marry, while sexual intercourse with a free individual was strictly forbidden. Those who infringed this rule could even risk the death penalty. The fact that bandits could assume a status similar to that of slave, by voluntarily accepting to become a *buonavoglie*, shows that their social rank was being equated in Hospitaller Malta to that of the slaves.

The Latin word *rusticus* yields insights into the cultural meaning that I am associating with the term "elite". For the purpose of this study, *rusticus* represents one particular social stratum, namely the class of people who were generally disdained. However, the same term could carry a different meaning in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In English, the word *rusticus* is translated as peasant which does not normally carry the connotations of ignorance, stupidity or boorishness more commonly evoked by the word rustic. In Malta, the Latin term *rusticus* was first expressed in the sixteenth-century acts of Birgu by the Arabic word *beduino*.<sup>5</sup> The use of this word fell out of favour in the next century and was replaced by the Italian word *villano*.<sup>6</sup> All the *villani* were rustics, but not all rustics were *villani*. In other words, peasantry portrays an economic activity; *rusticus* expresses a cultural denomination. In the mind of the urban elite, the rustics

were crude in character, and left untouched by the evolution in the art of learning, lacked refined manners and commodious living. Ferdinand Braudel's reference to a Polish aristocrat's "habitat" captures the European sensitivity to cultural refinement and the idea of class as put forward in the book *Il Cortegiano*. The Polish prince Radzwill, who ruled over a domain greater than that of Lorraine in France, was still considered by Dupont de Nemours, a hired-out tutor who was accompanying young aristocratic upstarts on their Grand Tour, as a rustic. On visiting his residence, de Nemours did not find the rich Polish aristocrat different from the serfs over whom he ruled and, to his great astonishment, this Polish noble did not even possess a bed and, like his subjected peasants, slept on an earthen floor.<sup>7</sup>

The picture of the Maltese elite, as it emerges from the late medieval *Capitoli* of the local *Universitas* and the notarial acts, is one where the Western European picture is only partially borne out. The plethora of titles is similar to that in use in Italy, but it also points out the non-existence of a middle social stratum. Judging from the surviving notarial documents of the late fifteenth century and the minutes of the town council of the same period, a specific set of titles stood for one social class. People at the upper layer were defined as *honorabilis*, *magisteri*, *egregii*, *nobiles*, and *magnifici*, while their wives could carry arbitrarily the title of *domina*. The pretentious added the superlative title of *missis* or *nobiles*.<sup>8</sup> In the early years of the 1530s, the manner of address of the Mdina elite had not changed much as all the above titles were used in the notarial deeds of the Rabat based notaries, Brandano de Caxaro<sup>9</sup> and Giuseppe De Guevara.<sup>10</sup>

Each of these titles stood for a particular class but their usage expressed no rank difference. On the contrary, some form of class parity seems to have been in existence. The word *magnificus* was used in late medieval Malta in reference to the town mayor, *nobilis* denoted a fief holder, *egregius* was applied to notaries and lawyers, *magister* stood for craftsmen while *honorabilis* often referred to owners of property and prominent merchants.<sup>11</sup> The use of such words, which in English are translated as magnificent, noble, egregious; master and honourable respectively, resonate hints of cultural refinement. Their form did not only affirm social equality, but also points towards the exclusion of a middle stratum. If such a stratum was in existence, it definitely enjoyed far less respect than after 1530. Those individuals, who by modern standards could be qualified as bourgeois, were in the late medieval period either in exalted circles or else classed with the peasants; the gauge was their cultural excess.

The decision of the new Hospitaller government to settle in Birgu modified existing social gradation. The creation of an urban environment reproduced in Malta what was happening in Europe at that time. The turning of Western European society into the core of what Immanuel Wallerstein called a 'world-economy'<sup>12</sup> implied the rise of a new bourgeoisie whose power was not in fief-holding but in liquidity. The people inhabiting those cities that were geographically placed on a network system focusing on trade made the biggest gains. This explains why the

people living in the harbour zone in Malta, despite the fact that they were dwelling in a place geographically distant from the old medieval core, drove the political and trade policies.

The establishment of a new elite in a city distant from Mdina could be a reason for the cultural devaluation of some of the ancient titles. The gradual transformation of the definition of power from land to trade meant that town burghers began to affect markers of elitism. The title of *messier* stands out as an example of this social change. In France, the upper noblesse was addressed in the Middle Ages by *messier* in front of their name. Slowly, the use of this title began to be democratised and changed to an honorific denomination used in the official acts of the king's chancellery in front of the names of exalted individuals. By the sixteenth century, priests, doctors, lawyers, and other professions began to abuse the term.<sup>13</sup> The trend also reached Malta. In the Middle Ages this title had represented a sense of exclusivity. The noble family of the Desguanez, for instance, even if it belonged to the European minor nobility, adopted the French way of address. This practice survived among the village nobility up to the early seventeenth century. In Qormi, the noble Matteo Cassia was still called *misser*, besides the other title of *nobile* in the early 1600s.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of the Hospitallers in Malta, and particularly the presence of French knights in Birgu, brought a general diffusion of *messier* among the towns' people. The only difference between the French and the Maltese term was in the spelling. The pronunciation continued to be French, but as Italian was the principal language used in Malta at the time, the term was transliterated into an Italian format and spelled *misser*.

Doctors, notaries, pharmacists and highly skilled craftsmen were designated as *misser* in the Birgu church records. The silversmith Gaudo de Arfio and the painter Matteo Abela<sup>15</sup> were addressed in the second half of the seventeenth century either as *maestro* or *misser*. Graziano Burlo,<sup>16</sup> Giacomo Buttigieg,<sup>17</sup> and Nicola Attard<sup>18</sup> were three artisans and members of the town's elite to be socially identified by this protocol. The *misser* title reached an apex of popularity around the 1570s, but a decade later it was already going out of fashion.

Is there any connection between the introduction of the Maltese word *missier*, meaning father, and the decline in the use of the elite title of *misser*? Did the word father in Maltese enter the vernacular during the time when it was being orphaned from its attribution of nobility? Incidentally, the Maltese term *missier* is pronounced in the same way as the French medieval title. If the Maltese word *missier* is derived from the French, it offers a local example of a fully democratised noble address. Malta would therefore reflect a tendency in this matter similar to that arising in England and France where this male title was respectively popularised into *mister* and *monsieur*.

## Protocol and title usage during the early decades of the Knights

Thus, until the next important change in protocol, which came in the baroque age, society in Malta bore the following bifurcated class stratification. The first class was of exogenous character composed the members of the Order of Saint John and formed a caste of its own. Practically, it had just one stratum that of the upper crust. The second had a more endogenous set-up, of a variegated quality. The high ecclesiastical prelates and noble families dominated the top levels. The middle stratum was a continuum of multi-variant professions ranging from craftsmen to collar workers to university trained professionals. The poor, the peasants and the working classes, occupied the lower stratum and were followed by a substratum of slaves and bandits.

The Hospitaller stratum was internally divided into three main branches: the Knights, the Conventual Chaplains and the Sergeants-at-arms. Yet, at social level, this division was apparent. Those who really mattered were the knights of obedience and of grace and despite the fact that they fell within the category of friars they still enjoyed higher prestige than the Hospitaller chaplains. Rank and nationality were the relevant chores for advancement in status and this was obtained through the enfeoffment of land units known in the Hospitallers' jargon as commanderies. At the top were the high-ranking knights, in particular the bailiffs and the grand commanders, followed by the lower ranking Hospitallers and then came the debuting knights.

For example in Qormi, the parish priest divided the Knights Hospitallers into three categories. The high-ranking knights (bailiffs, priors and grand commanders) were addressed as *molto illustrissimo*. The lesser ranked friars, such as the commanders or the ordinary chevaliers, were simply called *illustrissimo* or *honorabile*. A less prestigious title was reserved for the Maltese members of the Order and other low ranking knights: they were only addressed as *signore*. By the use of this title, they were being equated with the high-ranking Maltese.

Maltese society expressed a more variant division. In the sixteenth-century, the top remained occupied by a mixture of noble title-holders, highly skilled artisans, and the professional classes. The parish acts show the first signs of the creation of a middle stratum represented by the devaluation of the term *misser* and the frequent use of the term *maestro*. The latter was being arbitrarily used in the sixteenth century. In the same parish register, an individual can be found addressed as *maestro* in one act but hold no title in another. Such randomness is in itself a characteristic of a sub-elite. Then, at the bottom stood the peasants followed by the social outcasts.

Besides the members of the clergy, the nobles were the sole social category to hold steadfastly onto titles, even if, their social standing was often expressed by different names. The parish records of Birgu clearly show that the sixteenth-century local nobility lacked, at least among the town's dwellers, a well-defined protocol.

To a certain extent, this reflected late-medieval indistinctness in the use of titles. At this particular point in time, a noble person was identified either as *signore* or by his noble title. In Birgu, Antonio Inguanez was either called *signore*<sup>19</sup> or *barone*<sup>20</sup> but rarely both together. The village of Qormi does not deviate from this pattern. A member of the village elite, Matteo Cassia, was referred to by one of the following titles; *nobile*, *missier* or *dottore*.<sup>21</sup>

Women's position among the elite was less finely designated. In the sixteenth-century parish records, women were primarily addressed in three different ways, *signora*, *donna* and *madona*. These titles are a continuation of the medieval model, where the word *donna* was used in relation to wives of men of stature. However, as was said in a brochure published in 1876 on the occasion of a Royal visit to Malta, 'titles were in no way communicable to the wife'.<sup>22</sup> This rule went beyond the Knights' period. Despite the development of a new milieu, women were only addressed by a title if their husband had one. This can explain why in Birgu the wife of the *nobile* Antonio Inguanez was never mentioned in the acts by her name, as was the normal practice with the wives of the commoners, but only by her title.

In fact, few were the women referred to as *madona* in sixteenth-century Birgu and only one was identified as noble. She was called *baronessa*<sup>23</sup> and probably was a direct ancestor or wife of Antonio Inguanez. Yet, the title of *madona* and *signora* did not carry the same cultural attributes as their counterpart titles bestowed upon men. The latter could draw on a broader range of titles.

The only exception to the above, paradoxically perhaps, concerns women who were prostitutes or courtesans. The majority lived on the margins of society but some did manage to slip out of the social net to enter exalted circles. The repertoire used to denote street prostitutes, *peccatrice*,<sup>24</sup> *meritrice*,<sup>25</sup> *palamita*<sup>26</sup> and *donna libera*,<sup>27</sup> faithfully expresses social aversion, but the word register varied among those esteemed in high society, where they were addressed as courtesans,<sup>28</sup> *signora*<sup>29</sup> or simply *donna*.<sup>30</sup> In the baptismal acts of the harbour cities, in particular those of Porto Salvo in Valletta, there are random references to baptism of babies whose mother was an unmarried, titled woman. The fact that the name of the father is not registered in these acts denotes the uncontracted relationship that the mother had with her partner.

Protection, money and the possession of manners were the reasons behind courtesans' success. The money accrued from such a trade permitted them to express tangibly their social superiority. It was exhibited through dress, home ownership<sup>31</sup> and even portraiture.<sup>32</sup> Yet, all this could only materialise if women gained the protection of important men whose protection would reward looseness with prestige. Gaudy homes and luxuriant dresses which some of the courtesans came to acquire induced sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century society to look less disdainful towards them.

The Knights' massive interest in maritime activity left its mark on local strata by further enhancing the middle class with a new sub-elite consisting of ship



owners and other related occupations. Maritime trade began to be considered as a very distant occupation from the work performed by the other professions owing to the fact that jobs connected to ship management were particularly esteemed. The respect gained was high and expressed by the new social appellation of *patron*,<sup>33</sup> meaning owner. This title became synonymous with important seafarers. Work within the different grades of the maritime structure also began to carry titles. The man responsible for the co-ordination of the crew was addressed in the acts by the Italian word of *nostromo*.<sup>34</sup> The person responsible for the ship's crew was called *conito* and his assistant was referred to as *viscomito*<sup>35</sup> or *sottocomito*.<sup>36</sup> The *pilot* was also looked up to with respect and his occupation fell into the restricted category of jobs to be specifically mentioned in the acts.<sup>37</sup>

The commoners and peasants received no social designation. This was an accepted fact in an environment where the cultured elite determined the social landscape. The commoners' way of life appeared to the local gentry simple and not worthy of any social differentiation. Lack of education held back the peasants' social advancement. Any emerging difference within this class could only result from a negative criterion: differences in the levels of social destitution. This meant that individuals living on the border of the social ladder had tags, which expressed different depressing economic and social realities.

The poor were classified in the Italian documents as *povero* or *povera*, depending on their gender. Yet, the term was used differently between the towns and villages. An enormous social and economic gap differentiated the miserable poor. Beggars were common in Birgu but less frequent in the countryside. The lack of officially registered beggars in the villages did not mean that they had a better living than those of the towns. On the contrary, the absence of beggars put across the crude social reality of the rural societies. They lacked a cash-based economy with the consequence that towns boasted a better living. Here, the poor fared a better chance as at least they enjoyed the prospect of receiving alms. Many peasants lived at subsistence level, as the agrarian areas could only sustain groups based on close kinship patterns. At the village of Bir Miftuh, for example, the economic situation was depressed in the late sixteenth century to the extent that the parish priest distinguished between the *poveri* and the *poverissimi* (i.e. the poor and the indigent). At Naxxar, the indigent were termed *decrepito*, i.e., crippled poor.<sup>38</sup> The towns were characterised by a different type of poverty, the labouring poor. The classification used, *poveri* and *poverelli* (i.e. poor and the lesser poor) shows less economic strains. The final proof lies in the mortuary records themselves. The acts demonstrate that in Birgu, for example, the poor were mostly senior citizens, in particular old widows lacking all forms of social assistance.

## The Baroque Age

Titles began to assume a more elaborated form in the baroque age. Peter Burke accounts for a change in the way of life, where polite and elegant methods of

address were becoming more pompous, and words such as *messer*, *signore* and *signora* were being considered as socially indecorous by the upper classes, as even courtesans were employing them. Terms of *eccellenza* and *magnificenza* began to characterise the upper sectors of society in Italy.<sup>39</sup> The urge for pomposity and elaborative detail reached Malta and extended from the Church decorations and ritual to the writing of the acts. What are the reasons for this new drive towards exclusivity? The emerging urban structure, where the aristocrat and the town burghers shared a common space with the poor dwellers,<sup>40</sup> definitely played a determining role. The interactions of people of different social rank put pressure on the elite and induced them to reaffirm the rigid hierarchy of fixed strata,<sup>41</sup> with the result that any social abridgement between classes was lost.

The consequences were foreseeable. The local elites became more and more inward looking. Class division was accentuated, and diversity publicly manifested. Distinctive titles, elaborate ways of address, luxurious clothes, carriages and splendid country palaces were highlighted as symbols of superiority. They acted as registers of social differences, permitting the noble to walk amidst the poor while preserving an invisible barrier of communication between them.

The title of *misser* now became defunct, while the Italian term *signore* completely lost its distinction. Instead a set of Latin words began to be used, each one exhibiting a specific social position. The first to set the example were the highly skilled artisans and the professions, who in the late sixteenth century were mainly addressed by *misser*. Now, they called themselves *magister*. The same occurred to *magnificus*. In the eighteenth century, *magnificus* became the exclusivity of notaries and state magistrates. On their part, men of letters, lawyers, and medical doctors began to exhibit their university qualifications more prominently. Gone were the days when doctors and lawyers did not distinguish themselves from the other town's milieu and were addressed only by *misser* title, as happened to the notary Vincenzo Bonaventura in a baptismal act of 1558.<sup>42</sup> University qualifications and social attributes were now constantly paraded.

This kind of flaunting caused the permanent substitution of *signore* and *signora* by the Latin term *dominus* and *domina*. The use of *dominus* titles was mainly restricted to wealthy financiers and men of business or employed by the professions in front of their academic title. In other words, individuals possessing money, but lacking university or state honours, succeeded in receiving some form of popular respect.

Growing professionalism in the medical world became a matter of personal pride. The word *maestro* was completely dropped from the medical vocabulary. Its place was taken by *dominus*,<sup>43</sup> followed by the *dottore* title. Some doctors sought further attributes by having their job description referred to as an art,<sup>44</sup> or referring to themselves as *dottor fisicus*, sometimes adding the title of *illustrissimus*.<sup>45</sup>

The clergy were not left out of this cultural evolution. In late medieval Malta, the distinguished title of *reverendus dominus* applied mainly to high-ranking priests.<sup>46</sup> In the sixteenth-century parish records, they were identified as *clericus* or

*don*, the former meaning a cleric while the later stood for mister. However, few were those priests who upheld the "reverend" title. It was only in the next century that "reverend" began to accompany the name of all the secular clergy. Even the titles of higher-ranking members of the Church underwent a change. In the sixteenth century, they simply held one title as *canonicus* or *monsignore*, and the inquisitor was simply referred to as *monsignor inquisitore*. In the next century, the high prelates, including the inquisitor, added an extra title of *illustrissimo* or *reverendissimo*.

Some burghers had also sought to heighten their status by separating themselves from the artisans and craftsmen. As already said, no great distinctiveness was exercised in the late sixteenth century between the professions; all were addressed by the same title of *maestro*. Sculptors, silversmiths and painters received the same attributes and, as mentioned previously, even men of medicine were called *maestro*.<sup>47</sup> Such equality was discontinued in the seventeenth century. Highly skilled artists began to be distinguished from the other artisans with the consequence that the latter status was somewhat devalued. The former received the calling title of *magistro* whilst the latter remained simply *maestri*. In the late sixteenth, Matteo Abela was qualified in the acts both as *pittore* (painter) and *maestro*.<sup>48</sup> At the turn of the century, Michele Casanova, a local sculptor and painter, was still holding the title of *maestro*,<sup>49</sup> but was at the same time using the more pompous address of *magistro*. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the painter Gio Antonio Demessina<sup>50</sup> would pride himself by the title of *magistro* in Senglea's parish records. The records never refer to him by the term *maestro*.

However, not all the craft masters were happy with this arrangement. The carpenters were at the forefront in pursuing social prestige. The demand by Hospitallers and the local elite for intricate furniture and shipbuilding skills increased their status. In sixteenth-century Birgu, they were simply defined as *maestri d'ascia*<sup>51</sup> or masters of the axe. The latter referred to carpenters working on domestic furniture, caulkers and shipwrights. The social position of the *maestri d'ascia* began to be exalted in the seventeenth century. During this period, the carpenters in Bormla, for example, while still calling themselves *maestri*, described their job as *l'arte de falegname*.<sup>52</sup>

Women's titles also experienced some degree of change. Practically, all women of upper social rank began to carry a title, irrespective of whether they were the wives of a noble or a man of letters, and the use of their title continued after the husband's demise. Yet, the forces of social coercion remained strong, and with the exception of the nobility, only the title of *domina* was applied to women.

Such past discrimination left its marks on the number of women holding titles. In absolute figures, their number was less than that of men. In over 200,000 individuals mentioned in the acts, the title *signore* was applied to 700 men. *Signora* was far less popular as it was only found in 281 cases.<sup>53</sup> When the titles of *dominus/domina* gained popularity, the gender ratio had greatly improved: it became 1: 2 in favour of men.<sup>54</sup>

The middle stratum remained untouched by this gender issue. Among the sub-elite, the aristocracy's "gender rule" remained in force; only men expressed signs of social differentiation. The wives of artisans, for example, continued to be denied any form of social exclusivity. At this point, prostitutes ceased to qualify for social superiority. Any accumulated fortune or male protection stopped being taken into consideration. The eighteenth-century moral reforms, partly instigated by the local Church, and partly by the Inquisition, carried weight in degrading the said profession.

The lower classes were the sole people not to register any change in their status. The social handicaps remained intense. It was almost impossible for them to move up the social ladder. Whenever this happened, it occurred gradually, and under the patronage of one of the local institutions: the Inquisition, the Church or the Order. The following case studies are intended to delineate the rite of passage of both the middle and the lower strata to a higher social rank by focusing on past family histories.

### Case studies of social mobility

The Brul and Imbroll were two families whose fortunes were intimately tied to that of the Order of Saint John. They came to Malta in the early period of the Knights. Soon they realised the existing opportunities for forging partnership with the Hospitallers. Salvatore Imbroll was the son of a sixteenth-century magnate, notary Francesco Imbroll.<sup>55</sup> Salvatore's sterling service to the Order brought his accession to the high post of Grand Prior of the Hospitaller Church, a position that was a step away from the bishopric of the island. Despite his low level title of *maestro*, Diego Brul still succeeded in preparing the way for one of his offspring. The fact that Diego worked on corsairing vessels brought him into contact with knights of high calibre. Diego cultivated these relationships and took advantage of the baptismal ceremony to invite Raffaele Cottoner, a promising knight who eventually became Grand Master, as godfather to his baby.<sup>56</sup> The relation of Brul with the Cottoners continued to strengthen when Raffaele's brother, Nicolò, succeeded to the throne of the Grand Masters. Diego's son, Giuseppe, was appointed a page of the said Grand Master.<sup>57</sup>

The creation of Isodoro Viani into Baron of Tabaria by Grand Master Manoel De Vilhena on 11 December 1728 expresses the Order's considerations when promoting social advancement. Money alone was no guarantee of promotion. Loyalty built on generations of abounding service to the state led to the greatest credit. Viani's bull of concession lists these aforesaid merits. He was being honoured by a title for the 'continuous praiseworthy and profitable service' rendered by him and his ancestors to 'the present Grand Master Vilhena and his predecessors'. Such a meritorious service was said to have induced Vilhena to furnish a reward in the form of a noble title and the fief of Tabaria.<sup>58</sup>

The second institution that promoted social mobility was the Church. The existence in Malta of two strong ecclesiastical organisations, the bishop and the Inquisition, together with their system of patentees and range of honorific titles proved to be another vehicle for aspiring families. Carmel Cassar has extensively

shown the itinerary engaged by the Rispoli family, another foreign household which was attracted to Birgu by the economic prospects created by the Knights, whose commercial acumen and loyalty to Order first<sup>59</sup> and Church later<sup>60</sup> turned them into 'one of the most respected families within the Harbour area'.<sup>61</sup>

The Desain was another family whose history leads to an understanding of where the wheels of power lay; in their case their alliance was with the Church. Son of Claude, Aloisio Desain and his wife left France for Malta in what appears to have been an attempt to escape from religious persecution. Despite a nineteenth-century claim on the noble descent of Aloisio, which was made in a small brochure published for this purpose, the family held only a humble status in Malta. It settled in Valletta,<sup>62</sup> where the father was known as a *maestro*. Such a title excluded any claim on high rank. However, their fortunes would soon turn for the better. Three of his male sons joined the Church, two becoming assessors of the Inquisition and also canons of the local cathedral while the third was appointed a Curia's advocate. With such a background, it became easier for his daughter to marry a *uomo facoltoso*, the physician Giovanni Stafrag,<sup>63</sup> but the first move onto the nobility came with Stafrag's daughter Deodata Margherita who married a scion of the Barons of Castel Cassar.<sup>64</sup> Her husband was *maestro* Salvatore, who besides the claim of a noble ancestry represented the continuation of the Desain's link with Church institutions. Salvatore's father was *domine dottore* Gio Batta Cassar who after the death of his wife Vincenza entered the priesthood and became the parish priest of Birgu.<sup>65</sup>

Social intermixing with the other classes was not on the agenda of the local elite. The noble families sought to hold their titles and possession within their close circles, whilst resisting any upstart pretenders. For instance, the marriage of the title-heir Count Nicola Perdicomati Bologna to the daughter of the *uditore* Fabrizio Grech was not considered a good match by Nicola's father.<sup>66</sup> The reasons are reasonably clear. Nicola was infringing the nobles' unwritten code of tying the firstborn to a marriage with an equal partner. As a *capo sipide* (as the noblesse called its firstborn males) he was expected to marry in the nobility. It was only the scions of the nobility that were expected to marry into the professions, as was the case of Baron Alessandro Inguanez's daughter who was betrothed to notary Carlo Farrugia,<sup>67</sup> or the aforementioned Cassar Desain's granddaughter, who was married to a scion of a noble family.

The middle classes emulated this model with the difference that the apprenticeship of a trade replaced inheritance of titles while the rules of *primo genitura* were not valid anymore. The Birgu pre-Siege pharmacist Lauro, passed the *métier* onto his son Antonio.<sup>68</sup> Famous sixteenth and seventeenth-century Maltese artists were themselves a product of artisan families. The father of the Maltese architect Tommaso Dingli was *maestro* Pietro of Attard.<sup>69</sup> The father of Melchior and Lorenzo Gafa was *maestro* in Birgu.<sup>70</sup> In Senglea, one of the most proficient stone carvers, *maestro* Michele Casanova, taught one of his young offspring, Vincenzo, the same craft.

Once a social position within the middle stratum was attained, the family avidly sought to maintain the acquired status by forging alliances with their equals. In Valletta, all the offspring of the notary Lorenzo Grima were status holders,<sup>71</sup> a position that conditioned their marriage strategies. His offspring were all married to title bearers, and one of his daughters, Anna, who was addressed as *signora*, married into the other branch of the Casanova family, that of Natale, who was a leading tradesman and *patron* of a ship.

The artisans' marriage strategies echo the deep-rooted culture in Malta of what Jeremy Boissevain termed as friends of friends.<sup>72</sup> What follows are only a few examples to affirm the historical validity of this fact. The late sixteenth century painter Matteo Abela was son of *misser* Narduccio of Bormla. He married a social equal. His wife, Imperia Tabone, was the daughter of *misser* Gusmano of Birgu.<sup>73</sup> Another contemporary painter, Matteo Purbes, married in Birgu in 1588 Giulia, daughter of *maestro* Claudio Nizardo,<sup>74</sup> while in 1666 the Messina born painter Giuseppe Darena married the daughter of another painter Silvestro Querglio.<sup>75</sup>

The story of the Demarco family expresses the longer path taken by those families without any connections in high up places. The key to their success lay in their father's entrepreneurial spirit and in education. Marco Deluca came to Malta from Marseilles around 1624 at the age of 17. The lack of a proper surname is a strong indication that he had a distressing childhood. In fact, Deluca was not his actual surname but only a pseudonym, based on the name of his father and only intended to facilitate Marco's identification in the acts. He spent his childhood years in Ragusa but around the age of ten, Marco went to Naples. After a stay of three and a half years, he moved residence to Marseilles until he finally settled down in Malta, where he married a young female from Bormla, Margherita Scholaro, on 10 September 1628. Marco took time to consolidate his position. His humble origins were reflected by the absence of a proper surname, making himself known in town either by his father's name Luca, or by his country of origins, Raguseo. The wheels of fortune affected a favourable turn for Marco. In Malta, he found work as navigator on *vasselli di mercantia* of patron Custo.<sup>76</sup> Marco's son Matteo undertook the shipping trade, earning for himself the title of *patron* and more importantly, money for a better upbringing of the family. Matteo's social advancement started here. It was he who took for the family the surname Demarco (i.e. the son of Mark), and he was far-sighted enough to ensure education for his offspring. His son Paolo, armed with a good education, possessed the financial resources and knowledge to continue his father's business and expand it. Again he successfully reinvested part of his profits in the education of his children.<sup>77</sup> Three out of the four surviving males joined the priesthood. The youngest Matteo succeeded in advancing in the Church, eventually becoming parish priest of the village of Lija and canon of the Cathedral.<sup>78</sup> The sole surviving male to get married was Giovanni Giuseppe. He studied medicine and made headway as a physician.<sup>79</sup> Within the time span of 100 years, the family achieved the esteem of the landed gentry<sup>80</sup> but it was only with the fourth generation that its offspring could aspire to white-collar occupations.

## A new social covenant

The gap between the professions and the aristocrats took more time to be bridged. The entrance of merchants and financiers into the class of the nobility was not easy. Despite the possibility of social advancement through marriage, the crust of the social ladder remained out of their reach. Behind these norms of social rigidity, the nobility experienced the same political stalemate and frustration as local financiers, tradesmen, higher ecclesiastics and lawyers. They were all expected to remain passive observers in the local power game. Power was in the hands of foreign nobility, which demeaned the local political aspirations. The winds of change that were blowing in France slowly reached these islands. However, the French middle classes and the legal gentry were not greatly concerned with social justice. Jacques Rousseau's essay *De Contract Social* is indicative in this regard. Reading the book's title by contemporary standards would lead to the misconception that the treatise was a work on social justice, a plea for the rights of the working classes. However, Rousseau's essay represents the lawyers' aspirations for power through a new covenant between the bourgeois and the ruling aristocracy. The doors of high society remained closed to the French bourgeoisie. They were violently opened, with disastrous consequences for the state and judicial rights, through an alliance with the *sans culottes*.

Political reform took time to reach our islands. When the French system of government was introduced, the local professional classes found themselves ousted out of politics. The new French elite made up the worst form of government: a cabinet of army generals and military personnel. The latter were only concerned with the execution of orders but had little or no respect for political process and debate. The local bourgeois gentry had no opportunity to express their political aspirations. The result was tragic for the French and the Maltese. The use of a foreign military hand to calm down a parochial protest triggered the alliance of the Maltese third estate with the local poor: most importantly it bridged the gulf between the landed gentry and the professional elite. A new unwritten political alliance was signed between the upper and the high-middle classes, perfected by kinship affiliations in the decades to come. A more contemptuous end awaited the alliance of the local third estate with the poorer classes. Once hostilities were over and the island was freed from the French, their "social contract" withered away. The need for a new alliance between the elite core and masses was deferred by at least a hundred years.

Until this was to happen, the local elite continued to lament its defunct political autonomy. After 1530, the Maltese could only assert their protests by reverting to elaborate titles as a manifestation of superiority, which in the local context came to represent a sort of passive protest against the new rulers. In asserting their titles, they demonstrated to their rulers that local society did have an aristocratic class. But social unrest was not over. The endogenous elite also had to face the challenges of

an expanding bourgeoisie. The creation of new towns prompted the formation of a new class whose origins were in trade and education rather than land. The Hospitaller Institution and the Church were more than ready to give any aspiring burgher, who showed allegiance and fidelity, honours and titles. Yet, the native population did not benefit much from the political and economic changes, as the foreign residents were the preferred allies of the Knights.

In this political atmosphere, the use of high titles carried a dual meaning. First, they were an asset in the hands of the *nouveaux riches*, who thereby affirmed themselves on the island while still being able to interact freely with other members of society by acting as intermediaries between the Knights and the commoners. Secondly, titles and elaborate forms of address were expedient for the Hospitallers to keep their distance. Once enough capital, honours and titles were accumulated by any aspiring family of local or foreign origin, the old model would recur. The town burghers would conveniently forget their humble origins and would be more than ready to adapt themselves to the old model of reinvesting profits in land and perhaps forging histories of illustrious descent. It was at this point that a new alliance would settle in between the old and the new elite. Years of social collision would come to an end. An uneasy status quo would be reached, with both sides consolidating their family fortunes for at least one generation or more. Once this pattern of dependency is infringed, whenever one of the players voluntarily or not bars the door to the other, the chain of dependency that holds the different classes together, is broken. The way would then lay open to the making of a new social covenant.

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42. A.P. Birgu, *Liber Baptizatorum*, act 28-ix-1558.
43. A.P. Senglea, *Liber Matrimoniorum*, act 05-vii-1679.
44. Ibid., f. 374v. Dominus Gio Maria Abela described his profession as l'art e med doct.
45. A.P. Birgu, *Liber Matrimoniorum*, act 16-ii-1720.

46. Teeling, 64.
47. At Porto Salvo, for example, the surgeon Gio Francesco Buonamico was addressed by this title.
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51. V. Borg, 14.
52. AIM Proc. Crim. Vol. 68B. f. 439v, 424r.
53. 107 out of these 281 cases, held the title of *madona*, which for the purpose of this study are being included also under the heading *signora*.
54. This calculation does not contradict what has been said above with regard to the gained equality between male and female titles. The wife of a *dominus* was in the eighteenth century addressed by *domina*, but this equality is not being reflected in the above calculation due to the fact that this calculation is taking into consideration even the singles in possession of this title. Man delved a better chance. The use of titles by women still depended on a patron being her father or husband.
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