

# The ownership of black slaves in Malta

**DR SIMON MERCIECA** points out that the presence of African and Asian immigrants amongst us is not a new phenomenon for in the past Malta had already experience the migration of black people

The migratory flow that Malta has been experiencing in recent times is giving rise to a number of issues, which are of diverse nature and magnitude. However, there is no doubt that one of the controversies that is leading to a public debate concerning these illegal migrants is definitely about race. These illegal migrants are mostly of African or Asian origins and, more importantly, they are of a different skin colour from the Maltese population; in others words the great majority of these migrants are black. Is it correct to conclude that this phenomenon is something new to Maltese history? Did Malta experience migration of black people during the past?

In the past thirty years, the History Department at the Faculty of Arts – University of Malta, has continuously supported its students to undertake studies on past Maltese population. These studies began slowly to unearth hidden social realities including the presence of black slaves in Malta. More recent to our times, Godfrey Wettinger published a scholarly article on this past reality entitled *Black African Slaves in Malta*. (It was published in *Mediterranean Seascapes*, ed. Simon Mercieca – Malta University Publishers Ltd, 2006, p. 65-82). These slaves were of both sexes. Usually, male slaves were employed for manual work, such as construction projects or as rowers on the galleys. Well-to-do families bought female slaves to assist in the household chores. In some cases, a pregnant female slave was also bought to provide the service of wet-nurse. There is no need to repeat that

amongst these female slaves, there were those who were black.

The Church documents also give information about how these slaves were referred to at the time. The most common expression was for a slave to be called "etiopico" (for a male) or 'etiopica' (for a female). Some scholars have mistaken this term to mean a person coming from Ethiopia. In these church records, it simply meant a black person. This expression was commonly used in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

Another term, commonly used to describe a black slave, was 'nero'. However, it should be noted that at the time this term did not contain any racial connotation whatsoever and was used solely as a descriptive label. It should be pointed out, that during this period, men and women were not subjected to slavery on the principle of their skin but for religious reasons. Muslims subjected those Christian subjects with whom the Ottoman Porte had no diplomatic relationships into slavery. In return, those Christian countries, which were excluded from this form of relationship, subjected Muslims into bondage. Thus, Malta had its share of white slaves. The white slave was literally described as *schiaivo bianco* whilst an olive-skinned slave was called '*olivastro*'.

The presence of black slaves amongst Maltese families or in society at large was expressed with certain prominence even in art. One has only to go to Saint John's Co-Cathedral, and visit the tomb of Grand Master Fra Nicolao Cotoner (1663-1680) to realise that of the two slaves, sculptured in marble, carrying on their shoulders Cotoner's urn, is a black slave. This image reminds the visitor of the state of captivity of this black male slave. Other images can be proposed, which represent black slaves in private families. The inclusion of the image of a black slave in the painting, assisting its mistress is on the one hand an expression of bondage but on

the other an expression of respect. Definitely, the owner wanted to have his or her slave included in the painting to show his or her opulence. At the same time, by including the slave, I am convinced that the owner was expressing his respect towards the slave by considering him part of the family nucleus. Judging from the period and times, these slaves were definitely better off, in terms of dress and living, in respect to certain endogenous people. This situation does not seem to have created any conflict or social tension. Then, by the act of baptism, the slave was performing a right of passage becoming fully part of the family by renouncing his past to assume a new reality.

It was not a rare instance for slaves to get married. It should be pointed out that the majority of the slaves were males. Female slaves were by far fewer. Male slaves either sought to return back home after succeeding to get ransomed or those who remained on the island sought to integrate themselves with the rest of the population. Thus, they sought baptism and eventually obtained their freedom so that they got married. They either married another manumitted female or else their spouse or groom would be someone from the lower strata of society, usually a paid-off harlot. Thus, through marriage they now became fully integrated in Maltese society.

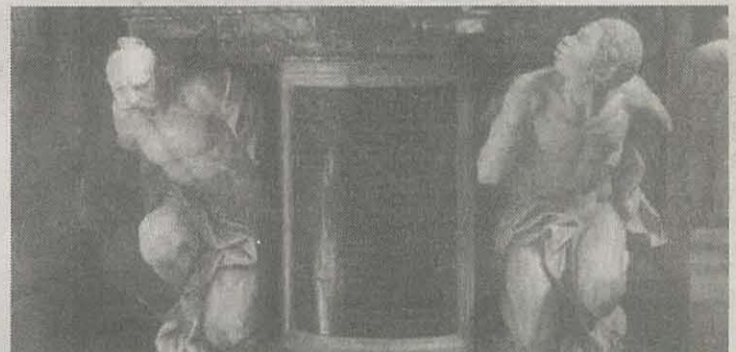


Photo taken from a book of Pinto's tomb showing underneath the image of a Turkish buonavoglia and a Negro black slave

There was also another reality primarily involving female slaves and this was concubinage. One should not exclude cases where slaves were owned and used, in the past, also by rich women as a form of gigolo. However, these are rare instances and it is very difficult to unearth and extract such a hidden reality from historical documents. On the contrary, it is easier to discover the presence of females slaves owned in particular by single male masters mostly priests and knights. This does not exclude that amongst these female slaves some were black.

It should be pointed out, that concubinage, in Malta, was an accepted reality, particularly up to the end of the seventeenth century. The local population not only knew about this reality but also approved it. On the other hand, it was only in the eighteenth century that the Catholic Church began to take this issue rather seriously and applied restrictive measures to curb what was by then beginning to be considered a millenarian abuse.

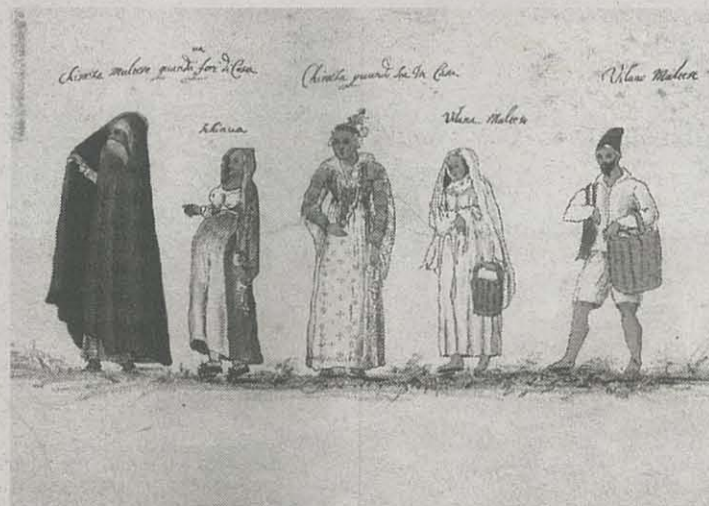
Concubinage was not something new to Malta. It already existed in medieval times but, during this period, the concubine was usually Maltese. During the Knights' peri-

od, it had become customary to take as concubine one of the captured young female slaves with the consequence that they were having children from their master. Again, the documents do not specify the paternity of the children born to slaves, and this irrespective of whether the slave was a black or white. However, in these cases, the owner usually appears as the godfather of the infant. Then, the final indication that the master/owner was also the father of the baby results in the will. It is not rare for someone to come across wills, formulated by knights or rich priests, in which part of the family fortune was left to the offspring of their slave. Among those who resorted to this system in their wills one finds the name of Mattia Preti and the priest-benefactor of the Tarxien parish church, Gwann Barbara.

Furthermore, the presence of black slaves was not a new reality confined to the sixteenth century that came into being after the knights of Saint John came to Malta. References to black slaves are also to be found in medieval documents. Their presence on the island, at the time, was a well-known and accepted fact, to the extent that they were represented in church iconography. In fact, the most important painting to be commissioned during the late medieval period, both in terms of artistic value and in terms of the commissioners of the painting as well as location, is the main painting for the Mdina Cathedral. This painting is a polyptych, that is, a retable made up of the main panel, surrounded by a number of panels, showing the life of the apostle Paul. One of these panels is dedicated to Saint Paul's conversion on the way to Damascus. In this panel, the painter showed St. Paul lying on the ground whilst the background is taking over by the figure of a number of persons on horse back.



L-iswed tat-Tarag'. The figurines of statues of black people that used to decorate the staircases of noble and middle-class homes are a reminder of the presence of black slaves in Malta



The woman slave is shown in a state of advanced pregnancy

# The ownership of black slaves

Continued from page 31

Behind St. Paul's horse, in the middle ground, the painter added the figure of a young

black boy. Whether the inclusion of this particular personage was intended to express a Maltese medieval reality or not, is not the point of my argument.

The point being made here is that the insertion of such an image did not create any controversy and this is due, in my opinion for the fact, that Malta had black slave at the time. The presence of black slaves was all over the Mediterranean, including in the present day Middle East, which by then in Muslim hands. The addition of such a figure could be an allegory to this reality, where young black boys were enslaved by Arabs to be turned into eunuchs serving in the houses of rich Muslim masters.

ing to other paintings, which were perhaps also considered slightly indecorous, it is rightly to conclude that the censorship on this image was imposed during the nineteenth century.

There exist all the good historical ingredients to make it extremely plausible that such a censorship was implemented in the nineteenth century. It is a fact that, during the British period, Malta too would be

over taken by the zeal of Victorian Puritanism. It was the period when a number of eighteenth-century ideas on sexual morality got mixed-up with nineteenth-century theories of racial superiority. The image of a black person amongst the audience welcoming St. Paul was definitely considered as something indecorous. In terms of modern parlance, our medieval ancestors had no idea of the correct pro-

tocol since the black person slave. One is that they had cover him up.

In my opinion authorities should be mended for an extraordinary historical chronicle received the same other religious by late nineteenth considered high to what was the ed as inappropriate. Paintings of Virgin Mary and infant Jesus o



Experience this new delightful Moroccan style resort a few minutes away from the "Spiagge di Sampieri" enjoying the romantic "lungo mare" of this small fishing village in Ragusa.

## Marsa Sicl'à

Mediterranean Paradise in Sicily



apartments (for 2 persons) starting from **€378** (Lm162.28) per week per apartment

Private sandy beach with facilities and rental of Sports equipment, Olympic length swimming pool, Pool Bar, Pizzeria, Restaurant, Mini Market, Excursions office, Bazaar, Cards room, Car Hire and Animation.

**globalair** travel & tourism - Malta  
Tel: (+356) 2137 4105 ext.113  
Fax: (+356) 2137 3588  
E-mail: travel@globalairtravel.com

**the TravelShop** by globalair  
90, High Street, Sliema SLM 1542 (next to The Palace Hatch)  
Tel: (+356) 27311443 / 21311443  
Fax: (+356) 2131 5093  
E-mail: markg@globalairtravel.com





**Black Female Slave:** Detail from a painting by Antoine de Favray (private collection) showing a Maltese noble family, and the presence of a young black slave playing with a young baby. The baby is being breastfed by a wet nurse

## 35° SOUTH

"You have only so many bottles in your life, never drink a bad one" - Les Evans

Our new Bottega Wine Cellar is home to a vast selection of wines from around the world. From the 22nd May to the 22nd June the Hilton Malta will be promoting the following wines

- 2007 '35 South' Sauvignon Blanc ~ Vina San Pedro
- 2006 '35 South' Shiraz ~ Vina San Pedro
- and other selected wines

## YOU RING - WE BRING ... ON TIME AND IN PERFECT



Pinto Road, Marsa Tel: 2558 2558 Fax: 2558 2606 www.vbie.com.mt

# in Malta

dared include a  
nd worse still a  
clined to think  
no qualms to

onto the souls in purgatory began  
being censored by having the  
naked breast or nipple of the vir-  
gin covered up.

The students of the Faculty of  
Arts undertaking demographic  
studies in the late sixties and  
early seventies were pioneers in  
revealing that what people  
thought, about an idyllic  
remote past, was a false percep-  
tion. Let us hope that this year,  
which is dedicated to intercul-  
tural dialogue, helps us,  
Maltese, to better understand  
our history and remember that,  
when we had the chance, we  
had no problem to subject  
black people into slavery.

n, the relevant  
d be highly com-  
arthing such an  
tail. In terms of  
cle, this painting  
ne fate as many  
paintings, which,  
n standards, were  
y indecorous due  
i being interpret-  
te sexual conno-  
gs showing the  
east feeding the  
sprinkling milk

## ACING future Challenges rough Intercultural Dialogue MALTA 2008

PHOTOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

sed by the European Commission Representation in Malta  
memorate the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue

-27, 2008 - Auberge d'Italie, Merchant Street, Valletta  
y to Friday - 08:00 to 17:00 Saturday - 08:00 to 12:00 noon



special offer

Discover what comes **extra**

Free €75/Lm32.20 talk-time, 100 MMS and  
10<sup>€</sup> music downloads with every **3G phone**

Samsung Z150 €175/Lm75.25	Nokia 3120 €179/Lm76.97	Nokia 6120 €229/Lm98.47	Nokia 6267 €279/Lm119.97

**GO** mobile

Call us anytime for free on 146      [www.go.com.mt](http://www.go.com.mt)      MADE FOR YOU

To subscribe to this offer please call 50705070. Special offer valid till 31st August 2008 or until stocks last. The free talk-time will be awarded €15/Lm6.44 per month for 5 months starting from September 2008. The Free MMS and music downloads have a 30 day time window. For more information visit any GO Mobile outlet, GO outlet or authorised dealer - more 3G models are eligible for this offer. Phones are network locked. Other terms and conditions apply.

# CT CONDITION

## VALHMOR BORG IMPORT/EXPORT LIMITED

### catering to the caterer

