

By Charles Gatt  
Sunday, 17 April 2016

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***Professor Maurice Cauchi: As Others See Us:***

***(What visitors to Malta over the ages had to say about Malta)***

Summary: Charles Gatt

Malta and Gozo were mentioned by early Greek writers and poets during



the Greek and Phoenicians expansion into the western Mediterranean. Around 300 BC, Callimachus identified the island of 'Gaudos' with the island of Calypso.

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The first Latin reference to Malta is by the Roman poet and historian Naevius (270 – c. 201 BC). In his epic poem, *Bellum Punicum*, he described how the island was plundered and laid waste by fire around 256 BC, during the first Punic War. Livy wrote that in 218 BC, during the second Punic War, Hamilcar, not the one who was Hannibal's father but the commander of a Carthaginian garrison of 2000 soldiers, surrendered the island to the Romans and Malta became part of the Roman province of Sicily.

□ **Professor Cauchi speaking to the MHA** □ □ **Photo: Lewis Zammit**

In his *Verrine Orations*, the Roman, Cicero, referred to ivory tusks stolen from the temple of Juno in Malta by the admiral of King Massinissa of Numidia (c 238-149 BC). In *Contra Verres* (70 BC), Cicero accused Verres, the Roman Governor of Sicily and Malta, of abuse of office and shamelessly plundering the riches of his province. Cicero's witnesses included one who hailed from Malta. He referred to the city of Malta, 'bearing the same name', which produced women's vests to satisfy the luxury demands of Verres, who was seen with a 'cushion of transparent Maltese cloth stuffed with roses'. He also wrote that Verres allowed pirates to use Maltese harbours.

Ovid, the Roman Poet, (43 BC – AD 17/18) stated that Malta was a fertile island.

The Roman author and philosopher, Pliny (25 – 79AD) mentioned the *catulos Melitaeos*, the Maltese dog. He assures us that placing one of these dogs repeatedly on the stomach will cure stomach pains. Many Greek authors also mentioned the 'Maltese dog'. Aristotle described them

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as 'exquisite' and they appeared frequently on statues, vases, and gravestones.

In the early 530s the Maltese islands became part of the province of Byzantine Sicily, under the name of 'Gaudomelete'.

Count Roger's famous geographer, the Arab scholar, Al-Idrisi, wrote *Kitab Rugar* in the 1150s. He described Malta as a large island, with a safe harbour open to the east, fertile and known for its honey. Life was concentrated in Mdina. A map shows the distances between Malta and major Mediterranean ports.

The chaplain of the Knights of St John, Jean Quintin D'Autun, described Malta in *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* in 1560. Montesquieu wrote later that the Order of Malta 'is most likely the most respected one in the universe'. Voltaire wrote, 'Nothing is better known than the siege of Malta'. By 1567 the heroic defence of Fort St. Elmo was widely known in Europe, through many pamphlets and descriptions circulated in Italy, Spain, France and Germany. The Siege featured strongly in novels, drama and poetry, exalting the Christian victory. In the five decades after the epochal siege, the Maltese islands featured in over 110 known published travelogues, travel diaries and editions of letters by travellers. By 1600, most authors assumed their readers knew about the Knights, the Great Siege and the Catholicity of Malta.

In Baroque Europe, Malta featured in a variety of epics, novels and other works, centred on the heroic deeds of the Knights of St John, such as Antoine de Saint Michel's, seven hundred page long, *Le Triomphe de Malte* of 1628. The great siege even found an echo in Greek poetry and in the Spanish poem *La Malea (1582)*. Many German writers wrote about the siege or made reference to it, including Goethe's

*Faust*

, (1790), Schiller's

*Don Carlos*

(1803/05), and Vulpius' very popular novel,

*Rinaldo Rinaldini*

(1798).

However, not everyone supported the Knights. Some Christian powers, especially Genoa and Venice, had massive economical interests in Turkey, North African and the Levant, trading with the Ottoman Empire. They resented the interference of the Order of St John, when its caravans

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or corsairs molested or threatened Muslim-Christian exchange. Venice may even have celebrated the news of the fall of St Elmo! Other countries, including England, appreciated the anger of the Ottomans against the Knights of Malta.

The British had little knowledge of Malta's history and culture, concentrating more on events and actions. They were impressed by the fortifications. Maximilian, Duke in Bavaria, quarantined in Malta for three weeks in the 1840s, stressed the advantages which British colonialism brought to Malta, especially the "neatness, law and order". He was more interested in the ex-library of the Knights of St John, where he found 40 000 books, many dating back to the knights.

The **Cippi of Melqart** is the collective name for two Phoenician marble cippi (candelabra) from the 2nd century BC. They have parallel inscriptions in Punic and Greek, which facilitated the deciphering of the Punic language.

In Homer's *Odyssey* (8<sup>th</sup> Century BC), Calypso kept her lover, Odysseus, a prisoner at Ogygia for seven years, before he returned to his wife, Penelope. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, countless authors and visitors, including Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, and Jules Verne, referred to Gozo as the legendary island of Calypso, though the cave itself was often referred to unkindly.

Fungus Rock (*Haġret il-General* in Maltese) contained the rare, parasitic plant *Cynomorium coccineum*, widely written about for its medicinal properties in the 17<sup>th</sup>

and 18<sup>th</sup>

centuries. Grandmaster Pinto installed a precarious ropeway and basket to the islet, which was also guarded to prevent any unauthorised taking of the plant.

St Luke's reports about St Paul's shipwreck and subsequent events on Malta led to the Pauline traditions and legends, important shaping forces of Malta's cultural identity. Many writers from Pliny (c. 70 AD) onwards referred to the lack of venomous animals. In 1588 Hieronymus Megister wrote the most extensive description of Malta till then, attributing the lack of venomous animals to its soil. Gabriele Rossetti wrote his poem *'L'apostolo S. Paolo che naufrago in Malta'* while in Malta (1821 – 1824). Albrecht was one of many travellers who referred to the miraculous power of the earth from St Paul's Grotto at Rabat. The famous 'Glossopetrae' or 'St

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Paul's tongues', believed to be the petrified teeth of poisonous snakes, were a standard feature of baroque treatises and travelogues.

In 1828, the first Duke of Buckingham commissioned a series of 19 watercolours of Maltese monuments, including Ġgantija and the Xagħra Circle. They are now in the national Library of Malta. In the same year, the British periodical *Archaeologia* featured a series of sketches of Gozitan monuments by British Officer William Smythe. George Angas made drawings of various sites in Gozo in September 1841.

Malta was considered a cosmopolitan centre, with many visitors and many different languages being spoken. Hans Christian Anderson in 1840 thought Malta to be African. Some Protestant writers like William Lithgow or William Biddulph in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century thought that Catholic and 'inquisition infested' Malta was a most dangerous place, inhabited by 'viperous people'.

In the 1790s, Albrecht Christoph Kayser's novel, *Gemahlde von Malta*, delved into Maltese language, archaeological excavations, history, economy and trade. He mentioned the Manoel Theatre, where plays were mainly performed by the knights in French or Italian. He also praised Malta's fruits.

Most travellers mainly visited Valletta and Mdina, maybe staying at the Grandmaster's summer residence in the Boschetto, and ignored the lives of the common people. However, John Henry Newman, an Anglican priest, who later converted to Catholicism and became a cardinal, visited Malta twice, in 1832 and 1833 and commented that the most positive quality of the Maltese was their industriousness. He was impressed by St Johns' cathedral's 'richness and exactness, minuteness and completeness of decoration' He also wrote, 'A great part of the population lived in poverty, a situation made even worse by the heavy corn tax which was levied by the British government.'

Many praised the beauty of the Maltese and Gozitan women, with their black eyes and pale faces, in their faldettas, but some also thought the Maltese quite 'Arab-like' or African, full of superstition and anachronistic ways of behaviour. The upper classes dressed like the French but many women and children of the lower classes begged.

Thackeray in 1844 described the Grand Harbour with its tangle of big and small ships and

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boats, the 'busy blue water,' and the rocks of the fortifications 'blazing in sunshine.' Valletta thronged with a lively, comfortable-looking population. Along Strada Reale, he saw the 'genteel London shops, and the latest articles of perfumery', as well as 'squads of priests'.

Seventeen corsair raids on Gozo were recorded between 1533 and 1599, the most famous being in 1551, when almost the entire population of 5000 was taken into slavery. Many writers commented on the fresh water springs and fertility of Gozo; the industriousness of the inhabitants, the abundance of grains, fruit and vegetables, sugar cane and cotton, the fine cotton sheets, and carpets similar to those from Turkey.

Albert Kayser (1750) described ancient artefacts discovered on the island including the story of a golden statue, a cow on a pedestal, with precious stones for eyes. A Gozitan farmer had found it and sold it to a rich Gozitan. Grand Master Pinto insisted that the owner hand this statue over to him. He refused to disclose its whereabouts and died as a result of torture. It is believed the statue had long before been sold to foreigners.

Boisgelin (1790s) and Lady Stanhope (1810) described people descending the perpendicular cliffs of Gozo, sometimes on ropes, searching for eggs, birds and fish. Others were impressed with the size, beauty and strength of the Gozitan donkeys.

Duke Muskau in 1835 detailed how some Capuchin monasteries, such as Palermo, mummified their dead. This was also practised at the Capuchin monastery in Gozo. Directly after death, the monk would be laid out in his full habit in a dry subterranean chamber for a whole year, then the corpse was transferred to a huge room and put against a wall.

George Angas in 1841 described mourners, 'newwieha' at funerals, smiting their breasts and singing in a low dismal voice, building to howling and tearing their hair.

Madox (1821) mentioned great quantities of quail visiting Comino, particularly in April and September, soon to be disposed of by the 'natives'. The English had also introduced rabbits to the islet. They met a similar end.

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Pelusio (1567) referred to the 'capers, cumin and cotton... wild olive trees, fig trees, vines... pastures and excellent honey' grown in Malta. Denon (1778) described it as a 'barren' and 'wretched' island but praised the industriousness of the inhabitants and elaborated on the Maltese cotton industry. Boisgelin (1790s) admired the industrious Maltese country folk and found the vegetables and fruit to be excellent. He wrote that an aunt of Louis XVI had a garden in Malta just to grow oranges and pomegranates for her own needs.... The animals reared on this island were rabbits, pigs, sheep, cattle and mules. Still, a huge amount of foodstuff had to be imported from Sicily.

Overall, the Maltese were seen as hard-working, thrifty people, doing the best they could out of the rather meagre resources available to them.

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