

THE REPORT OF THE KNIGHTS OF ST. JOHN'S
1524 COMMISSION TO MALTA
AND QUINTINUS'
INSULAE MELITAE DESCRIPTIO (1)

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Johannes Quintinus Haedus was born on 20 January 1500 in Autun in France. He became a priest and joined the Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta. He went to Malta shortly after the Knights took possession of the island in 1530 and stayed there until 1536. During that period he wrote the *Insulae Melitae descriptio*, which he finished in 1533 and published at Lyons in France in 1536. This description of Malta was re-edited in 1540, 1541, 1566, 1600 and in 1723-25 and translated incompletely into Italian in 1545 and 1566. After leaving Malta, Quintinus (or Quintin as he is sometimes known) became Professor of Canon Law at the Sorbonne University in Paris where he wrote many works in Latin on Canon Law and in defence of his religion. He died on 9 April 1561. (2)

The *Insulae Melitae descriptio* is the result of a personal investigation of the island itself together with some allusions to the classical traditions relating to Malta. It is written in classical Latin and many of its phrases and sentences derive their origin from the classical authors. (3) The reliability of Quintinus, except for some occasional exaggerations, is assured by the fact that most of the things described can still be seen in Malta. The idea of writing a description of Malta occurred to Quintinus in Malta itself (4) and

1. This article is an expansion of a part of my work on Quintinus, namely, The 1536 edition of *Quintinus' Insulae Melitae descriptio* (B.A. Hons. thesis, Malta, 1976), *A commentary on Quintinus' Insulae Melitae descriptio* (M.A. thesis, Malta 1977), and my publication *The earliest description of Malta: Lyons, 1536* (Malta, 1980). The two theses are available at the University Library, in Malta.
2. On Quintinus' life, cf. P. Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (ed. 1699), 2412-2413. On re-editions and translations of Quintinus' book, cf. my B.A. (Hons.) thesis, *op.cit.*, xix-xxiii.
3. My M.A. thesis, *op.cit.*, *passim*.
4. Quintinus, A2: *In Gallia Melitam editurus, quam ante annos aliquot elephas istic conceperam*; G. Bosio, *Historia della sacra Religione et illustrissima militia di S. giovanni gerosolimitano*. Vol. III, Venice, 1695, 90c. Note that in this article Quintinus is quoted from the author's edition.

in this he was helped by his travelling experiences and previous descriptions of other places. (5)

Quintinus' book has been confused with the report on Malta which some commissioners (eight of them) had made for the Grand Master, then still in Italy, in 1524. (6) This report is now lost; it was however then still available to Quintinus and to Bosio, the latter of whom included a summary of it in his book. (7) Elected on 28 June 1524, (8) the eight commissioners left Palermo for Malta and Tripoli on 13 July (9) and were already back by August of the same year. (10) These commissioners represented the eight langues of the Order, and were as follows: Fra Giovanni de Castellana (Provence), Fra Giovanni du Bois (Auvergne), Fra Jacques de Cheurières (France), Fra Paolo Simeoni (Italy), Fra Gaspare Glier (Aragon), Fra Nicholas Hussey (England), Fra Giorgio Schilling (Germany), and Fra Diego de Tones (Castille). (11) Quintinus, on the other hand, left Marseilles for Malta before 13 September 1529 and arrived in Malta

5. Quintinus, A3: *quod ed aliis quibusdam proxima ad te epistola feci*; C3v.; *Vale Sophe carissime, peregrinantis, id est, multa post experimentia, ea quae tu ante praecipiebas cognoscentis amici tui memor.*
6. E.g. E. Brockman, *Last Bastion: sketches of the Maltese islands*, London, 1961, 205-206; A.T. Luttrell, "The Hospitallers' historical activities: 1530-1630", *Annales de l'Ordre Souverain de Malte*, xxvi (1968), no. 3, 2; G. Mangion, *Appunti di storia linguistica maltese*, Pisa, 1974, 397-398.
7. Bosio, *op.cit.*, 3. 30-31.
8. *National Library of Malta, Archives of the Order of Malta (N.L.M., AOM)* ms. 411, f.202v.
9. *NLM, Università* ms. 12, f.362v.
10. *Ibid.* and *AOM* ms. 168, f.54v.
11. Bosio, *op.cit.*, 3.28. Note that writers give the wrong year for this commission, as e.g. L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and modern Malta*, London, 1805, 2.10; R. Montgomery Martin, *History of the British possessions in the Mediterranean comprising Gibraltar, Malta, Gozo, and the Ionian islands*, London, 1837, 168; J. Taafe, *The history of the holy, military sovereign Order of S. John of Jerusalem*, London, 1852, 3.267; A.A. Caruana, *Frammento critico della storia delle isole di Malta*, Malta, 1899, 6; F. Ryan, *The house of the temple — a study of Malta and its Knights in the French revolution*, London, 1930, 5; E.E. Hume, *Medical work of the Knights hospitallers of Saint John of Jerusalem*, Baltimore, 1940, 68; H.G. Bowerman, *The history of Fort St. Angelo*, Malta, 1947, 10; E. Brockman, *op.cit.*, 205-206; A.P. Vella *Storia ta' Malta*. Vol. I, Malta, 1974, 160 and 185. Other writers give the wrong number of the commissioners, as e.g. l'Abbe de Vertot, *Histoire des Chevaliers hospitaliers*, Paris, 1726, 3.514-515; H. Seddall, *Malta: past and present*, London, 1870, 45n.; F.W. Ryan, *Malta*, London, 1910, 49; A. Bartolo, "History of the Maltese islands", *Malta and Gibraltar illustrated*, London, 1915, 57; L. Viviani, *Storia di Malta*, Catania, 1933, 1.108; M. Monterisi, *Storia politica e militare del sovrano Ordine di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme detto di Malta*, Milan, 1940, 7; Brockmann *op.cit.*, 205-206; A. Sutherland, *The achievements of the Knights of Malta*, Edinburgh, 1831, 2.94 has mistakenly said that the commissioners were Maltese, while Vella, *op.cit.*, 200, n.19, has included Antonio Bosio in the commission.

on the following 5 April (1530). (12) This means that he must have gone to Malta before the Knights in their retinue took possession of the island on 26 October 1530, (13) but definitely not with the 1524 commission.

The report of the commissioners, judging from its summary in Bosio, describes the agricultural and defensive aspects of the island, as well as its geography and its people. In their attempt to dissuade the Grand Master from accepting the island from Charles V, the commissioners tended to stress on the poor quality of the fields and the scantiness of defensive strongholds. A pessimistic outlook pervades the whole summary of the report. Quintinus' description of Malta, which takes the form of a letter addressed to an imaginary friend, is lively and at times even humorous in tone. (14) He praises and admires the quality and fertility of the Maltese soil and appreciates the natural defensiveness of the island, particularly that of St. Angelo, the main stronghold which, together with its neighbouring village, provided the residence for the Knights on their arrival.

That the report of the commissioners outlived Quintinus is beyond doubt; Bosio after him wrote a summary of it, as said above. That it was available to him is clear from the some passages in Quintinus which have a reminiscence of the report as summarised by Bosio. To illustrate this, I shall compare various passages from the two sources and quote them according to the same subject-matter.

On geography

- i "Essere la Città posta quasi nel mezo dell'Isola, intorno a sette miglia distante da' Porti, dal Castello, e del Borgo, che stanno al mare" (Bosio, 3.30c).

Octo a uico millibus in mediterraneo ciuitas est, maioris cuiusdam reliquiae (Quintinus, B2v.).

- ii "che l'Isola del Gozo, era di giro la metà minore di Malta, ma assai più fertile, et amena" (Bosio, 3.31A).

Est insula Gaulos breuissimo transitu a Melita, latitudine intercurrentis

12. Quintinus, A3: *Melitam demum superato Pachuno peruenimus ad Nonas Aprilis, quum nos ante Septembris Idibus Massilia soluissemus.*
13. Bosio, *op.cit.*, 3.89A.
Bosio (3.90c) also says that Quintinus was present at a conversation which Grand Master l'Isle Adam had with some Maltese notables on Maltese traditions and heritage in November 1530. On this occasion Quintinus was inspired to write a description of the island.
14. Cf. e.g. his description of Maltese women, Clv.: *Feminae non ignobili forma, sed persimiles feris; coetum reliquorum mortalium fugiunt; uelatae prodeunt foras, ita ut his uidisse mulierem, stuprasset sit.*

freti quinque millia non amplius passuum: parua quidem, ambitu duntaxat XXX. millia passuum; sed quae fertilitate non cedit Melitae (Quintinus, C2v.).

On defence

- iii "Non hauere altra Fortezza, ch'vn picciolo Castello, per l'antichità mezo rouinato; opposto alla bocca del Porto grande: il quale se ben'era alquanto eminente, era nondimeno ad espugnarsi, e minarsi facilissimo; massimamente dalla banda d'vn picciol Borgo d'alcune case di marinari, che teneua vicino; e che se bene con spesa grande si poteua isolare; restarebbe nondimeno a batterie da più parti soggetto. Esserui buona quantità di cisterne, et alcuni pozzi salmastri. E che dentro del detto Castello v'erano circa quaranta casette, e che l'habitatione del Castellano non era molto buona, da vna sala impoi. L'artiglierie sue non consistere in altro, ch'in vn mezo cannone petriero, due Falconetti, et alcune bombarde di ferro, malissimo in ordine" (Bosio, 3, 30D).

Arx est praeruptae alta in cacumine, excisae et undique impendentis rupis, ad Orientale insulae latus, in Aquilone tendens, ante tota ruinis deformata et caduca, uix consistens, sed quam modo, praeter naturalia praesidia et praecipitia, sic assiduo quoque opere muniunt, ut sit, si pergant, futura breui inexpugnabilis, et hosti nullis belli machinis, nullo ferro, sed fame tantum peruia (Quintinus, B2v.).

- iv "essere l'Isola sopradetta alla rapacità, e depredatione de' Corsali infedeli miseramente soggetta; i quali liberamente, e senza paura, o rispetto alcuno del Castello; nell'vno, e nell'altro Porto entrando, gran numero di quei pueri Maltesi bene spesso schiaui conduceuano" (Bosio, 3.31A).
Semper enim fuit piratica statione nota (Quintinus, B2).

On society

- v "che la maggior parte delle case erano dishabitate" (Bosio, 3.30d).
Lacerae et ruinosae aedes putribus et infectis parietibus, humili solo; sine contignatione aedificia, tecta rudera aut pavementis aut arundinum tegulo operata, quod potest pauitur (Quintinus, B2v.).
- vi Vsando gli Isolani per iscaldare i forni, certi cardoni, che si ricogliono per la sterile campagna; la quale di poco altro abbondaua. Seruendosi oltre di ciò comunemente i Maltesi, dello sterco de' Boui, e de gli Asini, per cuocere le loro pouere viuande; seccandolo al Sole, il quale riuerberando in quelle rocche, con eccessiuo calore nella state, oltre modo punge, e cuoce" (Bosio, 3.30E).
Carduis quibusdam incolae pro lignis utuntur, qui cum siccato boum editu, clibanis et furnis praebent usum (Quintinus, B4v.).

vii "Essere l'Isola assai honestamente popolata, et habitata, in alcuni Casali sparsi, et aperti" (Bosio, 3.31A).

Pagis est et incolis frequentior quam pro terrae bonitate (Quintinus, B2).

On countryside

"Hauere l'Isola alcune altre fontane dalla parte di Ponente, con la comodità delle quali, alcuni pochi giardini, all'istessa Città circonuicini, si tratteneuano" (Bosio, 3.30D).

Fontibus rigua est, hortis consita (Quintinus, B3).

ix "e dalla Città verso Leuante, quantunque sassosa fosse, essere seminabile" (Bosio, 3.30D).

Petrosa pene tota est et salebrosa; etiam (quod non crederes) ubi aliquid gignit, terra uix binum aut trinum cubitorum altitudine, ut saepe mirari succurrat, quomodo in ea radices agant arbores, fruges gignantur, frutices uiuant, lapidibus omnia occupantibus (Quintinus, B4v.).

x "Essere l'Isola aridissima, e d'ogni sorte di selue, di boschi, e di legna spogliata, e priua: essendo necessario condurui dalla Sicilia tutta quella, che vi s'ardeua" (Bosio, 3.30E).

Pleraque eius alia inculta, et deserta omnia (Quintinus, B4v.).

xi "Non produrre l'istessa Isola vettouaglie, se non per la terza parte dell' anno: prouedendosi i Maltesi del restante dalla Sicilia, dalla quale, per antico priuilegio, che con l'istesso Regno vniti gli dichiara, tiene l'estrattioni de' formenti e d'ogni altra sorte di vettouaglie; d'ogni diritto, e gabbella libere, e franche" (Bosio, 3.31A).

Incolae hoc maxime cupiunt serere, si liceat, quoniam quaestus plus quam e frumento, cuius etiam admodum ferax non est insula. Hac una re uel maxime felix, quod iuxta sita est Sicilia, frugum omnium fertilissima, quae illis pro horreo est, fame alioqui perituris (Quintinus, B4).

From these passages one can note how the extracts from the summary of the report are generally longer than those from Quintinus, which fact suggests that Quintinus had plenty of material at his disposal. This does not mean that he wrote a summary of the report himself, for, as can be seen from the extracts themselves, the sequence of the passages in Bosio does not correspond to that in Quintinus, while it is fairly unlikely that Bosio changed the order of the ideas in summarising the original; furthermore, it is well known that Quintinus sometimes gives a version of what he saw himself expressing it through words and phrases of Latin writers. (15) One must not forget also that certain passages in Quintinus dealing with the Classical and

15. Cf. *supra*, n.3,

the Pauline traditions about Malta, do not find their equivalents in the summary of the report in Bosio, obviously because the commissioners were not concerned with such references. (16) Quintinus' aims and those of the commissioners were different; the report of the latter should not, therefore, be confused with the description of the former.

16. Quintinus, A3-B1v., C1v.-C2v.