

## Book reviews

Henry Frendo (ed.), *Storja 2003-2004*  
 Malta University Historical Society, Malta 2004.  
 pp. 140.  
 Lm 2.50 (paperback).

The first number of *Storja* was published in 1978 and it now purports to be 25 years old. On the face of it, this appears to be very true but I think that an allowance should be made for the lengthy gap in years between the first and the second numbers for reasons one does not need to delve into and when the MUHS was in suspended animation. Actually, this number is the fifth one, with the intervening numbers having been published in 1996, 1998 and 2001. One must, however, congratulate the MUHS for its courage in resuming its publication after so many years and for setting the record straight in the editorial of the present number. Just as important, this society presented us, in these four editions, with a number of valid and thought-provoking articles.

This latest number is a tribute to the university lecturers and students who have striven, over the last eight years, to keep *Storja* alive. It includes nine annotated studies, five abstracts from history-related theses, a list of history-related dissertations and theses presented to the University of Malta in 2000 and 2001, and four book reviews.

The leading article by Charles Dalli on 'Greek, Arab and Norman Conquests in the making of Maltese History' discusses how the traditional treatment of Maltese medieval history revolved round the concept of conquest. The author notes how local history was aligned to that of Western Christian Europe and then goes on to discuss Al-Himyari's account on what seems to have been an abandonment of the island after AD 868-9.

'The Falzon Family and the Capomastro of its House at Mdina' is the subject tackled by Professor Godfrey Wettinger who deals with the fortunes of family and house from 1300 to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His information on *Capomastro* Jacobo Dimag is important since he was responsible for the building of the existing façade of the house, including its characteristic windows.

Emanuel Buttigieg's 'Church Bells and Street Fighting: Birkirkara and Don Joannes Matheo Camilleri (1545-57)' highlights the shortcomings of some members of the Maltese clergy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who seemed to excel in perpetuating the complete opposite of what was expected of them. Buttigieg also writes about Camilleri's successor, the notorious Don Giuseppe Bellia, who certainly did his level best to continue dragging down clerical reputation to the lowest levels.

Dr Carmen Depasquale – 'French Knights and Maltese Inhabitants in the XVIII Century' – and Professor Henry Frendo's 'Czars, Knights and Republicans: The

Malta Question in Paul I's Time' deal with Malta's relations with France and Russia respectively. Dr Carmel Vassallo's 'Maltese Entrepreneurs in Spain 1750s-1850s: Some Lessons for the Present' achieves exactly what the title implies. It is another feather in the cap of this author who has contributed so much new material over the years in the field of Maltese economic activity in Spain.

'Parish Clockworks in XIX Century Ghaxaq' is a good foray into village history by Sandro Debono whilst Dr Charles Savona Ventura's 'Early Medical Literature in Maltese during the XIX and XX Centuries' touches a new subject: the nature of medical literature written in the vernacular but which also highlights the great amount of information which medical history provides. The last contribution is Pierre Dimech's 'La fin de l'Emigration Maltaise en Algerie: Circonstances et Causes' where the author attributes the decline of Maltese migration to Algeria to the anti-clerical mentality of the French settlers in North Africa, a point worth being followed up by further research.

Personally, I prefer footnotes to endnotes which, anyway, could have been presented in justified form and standardised, at least for uniformity and better professionalism in presentation. Moreover, a list of abbreviations is a desideratum and I suggest that a comprehensive 'Notes to contributors' be drawn up by the Society and published in the next number. Yet, all things considered, I look forward to the next number which, I hope, will include more contributions by new History graduates.

**Joseph F. Grima**

**William Zammit, *Il Naufragio di San Paolo in Malta ossia la conversione di San Publio e dell'Isola, opera morale 1748: A Maltese eighteenth-century play by Vittorio Gristi***

**Publishers Enterprises Group, Malta 2004.**

**pp. 266, illustrations, bibliography, appendices.**

**Lm 6.75 (paperback).**

**ISBN: 99909-0-383-2.**

While undertaking his Ph.D research, William Zammit discovered in the National Library of Malta the play by Vittorio Gristi, entitled *Il Naufragio di San Paolo in Malta ossia la conversione di San Publio e dell'Isola: opera morale, 1748*. He quickly set out to transcribe the text in a meticulous way, and undertook a study of the historical context which explains its very existence. The book is very interesting because it throws light on the political and social aspects of the island in the eighteenth century, with particular emphasis on the burgeoning consciousness of a national identity.

Zammit starts by providing biographical information about Gristi. He was born in 1714 and initially occupied high office as Head of the island's Supreme Court of Appeal (1732-37), then Head Notary of the *Gran Corte della Castellania* up to 1743. He was eventually appointed Chancellor of the Maltese municipal authority, the *Università*. Moreover in 1752 he was appointed chancellor to the Maltese Inquisitorial tribunal, a very prestigious post which he occupied until 1782. Gristi died in 1787.

The play about the shipwreck of St Paul, and the consequent conversion of St Publius and the Maltese forms the subject of Zammit's study which precedes the text of the play. It constitutes an *opera morale*: a typical Counter-reformation stage performance aimed at transmitting a moralising and triumphant message. Zammit underlines how such plays, which were often staged in makeshift open spaces, were common in Malta during the eighteenth century even prior to the construction of the *Teatro Pubblico* by Grand Master Vilhena in 1732. The author is rightly convinced that 'the survival of the play's complete text ... enables a detailed examination of what to date constitutes a unique example of Maltese eighteenth-century patriotic drama'.

Briefly, the play revolves around Publius, the prince of the island when St Paul's shipwreck occurs. Publius was engaged to Teodorica, but he already had dreams that he should not marry her because the gods intended a different fate for him and Teodorica. The island is meanwhile devastated by inclement weather, and the prayers to the pagan gods have proved fruitless. When news is brought to Publius that a ship had been shipwrecked and that a certain Paul is doing miracles, he is interested and goes to see what was happening. He recognises in Paul the man who had talked to him in a dream and becomes convinced that the man is in

some way special. After keeping Paul guest in his palace, and following the healing of his father and that of many Maltese, he decides to convert to Christianity.

Zammit stresses the historical significance of the work, especially since the play was written and staged during a heated debate as to the actual location of St Paul's shipwreck. In fact, St Paul's shipwreck was being shifted to Meleda (nowadays Mljet). Maltese historians, chief among whom was Giovanni Antonio Ciantar, rebutted these claims. Gristi's play was yet another attempt to underline that the shipwreck did actually occur on Malta. This insistence on St Paul's shipwreck and Malta, as well as the emphasis on Publius being Maltese (which, historically speaking, is gratuitous) indicate how that episode was exploited by the Maltese intellectuals to show that they had an identity, one which was ultimately derived from a religious authority.

Zammit's study is indeed very interesting, and, given that in recent years other scholars, both local (M. Buhagiar, J. Azzopardi) and foreign (T. Freller) have contributed much to the Pauline tradition, we may now be in a position to assess what exactly was happening during the eighteenth century as regards national consciousness. From a historical point of view, Zammit's book is a very valid contribution to our knowledge of the *Settecento*. The book has also made available an interesting text in Italian of a play which I reckon has still to be assessed within an Italian literary context. I feel that the main plot and sub-plots are influenced by the Baroque penchant for the marvellous and the extraordinary. Since Zammit himself hints that the text might, at least in part, be the work of Vittorio's maternal uncle, the renowned Maltese playwright Giacomo Farrugia (1670-1716), it would be really worthwhile if some *italianista* were to study Gristi's work and collate it with that of his uncle, or with that of others – especially in the Jesuit circle – who produced plays in the same genre.

**Gerald Bugeja**

**Alain Blondy, *Des Nouvelles de Malte: Correspondance de M. l'Abbé Boyer (1738-1777)***

**Direction des Archives, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris 2004.**

**P.I.E.-Peter Lang (distributor; [www.publicity@peterlang.com](mailto:www.publicity@peterlang.com)).**

**pp. 280; illustrations, index, bibliography.**

**ISBN: 90-5201-229-6 (paperback).**

The publication of sources for Maltese history has recently received the impetus it very well requires through the efforts of a number of historians, and Professor Blondy's latest publication constitutes yet another important contribution in this field. This time it was the turn of the eighteenth-century historians to be regaled with a particularly interesting albeit mostly ignored source.

Blondy's publication consists of an annotated edition of the correspondence written by knight commander de Viguier, between May and October 1738 and the much more extensive collection of letters authored by the controversial abbé Boyer, spanning the period November 1774 to April 1777. Both collections of letters – together with other material – presently constitute National Library of Malta Manuscript 137. The letters were addressed to the Balí de Breteuil, who was, for many years, the Order's ambassador to Rome and the correspondence served to keep Breteuil informed of happenings on the island. It was mostly due to the establishment of the Order's *Biblioteca Pubblica* during the second half of the eighteenth century that such material found itself back on the island. Indeed, following Breteuil's demise, his collection of printed and manuscript works – presumably comprising the Boyer correspondence – is known to have been shipped over to the island in 1786 and mostly integrated within the Order's library.

Claude-François Boyer (1733-1790) was a French conventual chaplain of the Order with a rather colourful career. Deprived of his habit and imprisoned in Fort St Elmo for a variety of serious transgressions, Boyer was eventually absolved of all censures by Order of Grand Master Ximenes in August 1773, following pressure from Rome to do so. Not particularly well-disposed towards the Maltese as is evident from comments in his correspondence, one of Boyer's greatest adversaries was Albino Menville, the Maltese conventual chaplain who was to rise to high office under Grand Master de Rohan. Menville was in fact appointed auditor to the Grand Master and, following the death of Grand Prior Mainardi in 1785, to the very prestigious post of Grand Prior. The appointment resulted in its opposition by a number of members of the Order who showered Menville with abuse. The painting reproduced on the cover of the publication is particularly relevant in this respect: it consists of a caricature of Grand Prior Menville, who is made to look like an overgrown child, surrounded by members of the Order showering him with mock respect. Possibly the painting was commissioned by Boyer himself, although both the subject depicted and Boyer's involvement in the painting's execution have recently been questioned.

To the historian, the major interest in Boyer's correspondence lies in the sheer variety of subjects it covers. From performances held in the public theatre to the eventful occurrences of September 1775, Boyer's letters provide us with invaluable insights and current opinions, besides actual facts. It moreover covers a particularly sensitive period where relations between the Order and its Maltese subjects were concerned. The recounting of rumours, hearsay and the expression of opinion which is provided by Boyer's letters constitutes an invaluable source and one which is not provided by official documentation. Besides the actual annotated correspondence, Blondy provides introductory material of a biographical nature together with a discussion of the historical context of the letters. An index and bibliography – both indispensable tools in a work of this nature – are also provided.

**William Zammit**

**Marino Viganò, 'El fratín mi ynginiero' I Paleari Fratino da Morcote ingegneri militari ticinesi in Spagna [XVI-XVII secolo]**

**Edizioni Casagrande, Bellinosa 2004.**

**pp. 552; 50 photographs, illustrations in the text, appendices and index of names.**

**€ 50 or SF 75 (paperback).**

Until relatively recently, the engineer sent to Malta by Philip of Spain to vet Francesco Laparelli's design of Valletta was known to Maltese scholars only as *Fratino ingegnere famosissimo* in Bosio's account of the famous and heated debate between the two men on Mount Xiberras early in April 1566. He was so famous that academics were not agreed as to his actual identity and career! Fratino was in fact Giovan Giacomo Paleari Fratino (el Fratin) one of the most famous products of a family of military engineers in the service of Spain – the Paleari Fratino -from Morcote near Lugano in the North of Italy. Three brothers: Giovan Giacomo, Bernardino and Giorgio Paleari Fratino were engineers as were Giorgio's son and grandson Francesco and Pietro. Dr Viganò's account places Malta firmly in its context as an integral part of the Spanish defensive system during Spain's *Siglo de oro*.

Dr Viganò has produced an impressive account of the activities of this extraordinary family who worked on fortifications all over the Spanish domains in the Mediterranean and elsewhere: Milan, Cagliari, Pamplona, San Sebastián, Gibraltar, Cadiz, Lisbon, Oran, Mers el Khebir, La Goletta of Tunis and dozens and dozens of other places in Italy, North Africa, Spain and Portugal etc.. This book is a major contribution to the history of military engineering; the product of research in all the relevant archives in Italy, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere both public (state, local, notarial and ecclesiastical) and private and backed by a thoroughly comprehensive use of the printed primary and secondary sources. It would be fair to say that Dr Viganò's coverage of the subject is nothing short of encyclopedic. He is a great credit to Italian historical scholarship. All students of Italian military engineering during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially around the Mediterranean littoral will welcome this book if only to find out what materials are available in their particular line of study!

Year in year out the Paleari Fratino engineers journeyed around the dominions of His Most Catholic Spanish Majesty transforming the cities and towns they fortified with bastioned enclosures and changing their geography forever. That they not only reported to the monarch through his private secretary and his *Consejo de Guerra* but often directly and in person to the king himself speaks volumes for the importance of their work and their personal standing with the king. They would present their proposals and reports respectfully, even obsequiously in the manner of the day, but they would stand by their recommendations. For his part *el Rey prudente* would listen and give due weight to their views and write personally: '*al fratín mi ynginiero y capitan ordinario de jnfanteria.*'

Through comparisons with the work of their contemporaries, his book also establishes just how important the Paleari Fratino engineers were in the history of military engineering. One somewhat insignificant example (described and documented in the book) eloquently makes the point: Giovan Giacomo's contribution to coast defense through his designs for small isolated works for strategic positions was felt right down to the late nineteenth century. In 1794 one of his coast defense towers, the *Torre della Mortella* in Corsica (completed in 1565), armed only with one 6pdr. and two 18pdr. guns and a garrison of thirty eight men, fought off two British frigates: Fortitude (74 guns) and Juno (32 guns). The tower was under continual bombardment for two days. At length the British were obliged to land troops and artillery and lay the tower under formal siege by land, at which point the commander hauled down his flag. This of course was the famous 'Martello Tower'. The British were so impressed by Giovan Giacomo's tower, they made plans and drawings of the *Torre della Mortella* and proceeded to build copies of the 'Martello Tower' pretty well everywhere, at times chains of them: Cape Colony (1796), Halifax (1796-98), Minorca (1798-1808), the South coast of England (1803-12), Dublin ((1804), Quebec (1805), Jersey (1807), Orkney (1812), and Saint John, New Brunswick (1812). The design was adopted by the United States of America in the 1820's and the last Martello Towers were built at Key West in 1873!

The publishers would do well to include a general index of names, topics and places rather than just an index of names when the book runs to its second edition and to number and list the illustrations and figures. These additions would make this excellent but necessarily weighty book that much more accessible as a work of reference as well as the being the excellent study of the Paleari Fratino engineers that it is. A comprehensive bibliography of the secondary sources cited is also desirable.

The book is available from the publishers:

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