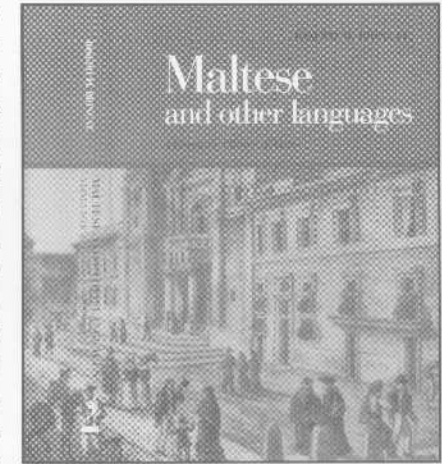


## BOOK REVIEWS

**Joseph M. Brincat, *Maltese and other languages. A linguistic history of Malta*, Midsea Books, Malta 2011, pp. 496, ISBN 978-99932-7-343-1.**

Although spoken by a very tiny community, the Maltese language has long attracted the attention of numerous foreign and local scholars. They have found it an intriguing source of cultural encounters, all absorbed and modified according to the strict dictates of an amazingly precise linguistic system. This has always implied that scientific competence had to be multilingual, regional and even intercontinental. With such an approach Maltese has been presented and analysed as much more than an inward-looking, restricted speech habit. The internationality of Maltese has thus been solidly and convincingly established.



Professor Joseph Brincat is an eminent member of this large group of scholars. He has distinguished himself as a linguist who does not see any geographical or cultural barriers separating a linguistic phenomenon from any other. Languages interact and constitute one complex whole. His methodology far transcends the limits of comparativism. His field of investigation concerns various languages in contact, and the end-results of his research are much wider than those expected from an Italianist.

His impressive list of linguistic publications, issued both locally and abroad, amply proves that he departs from his specific standpoint as an Italianist with the aim of establishing the relationship between different verbal modes of expression. Seen within this perspective, his deep interest in the Maltese language acquires its most distinctive significance. He has thus successfully constructed the linguistic history of Malta from the earliest evidences of verbality to our times, when the traditionally despised language of the Maltese has actually reached its uppermost promotion as one of the official languages of the European Union. Professor Brincat traces the evolution of speech and writing in Malta throughout the ages in such a manner that history and social communication, facts and words seem to complement each other, constituting one unique whole.

*Maltese and other languages* is perhaps the most distinctive work of this eminent scholar. It provides a secure point of reference to all his previous works, all aimed at describing the complex way the inhabitants of Malta, apparently isolated and detached from the outer world, actually managed to make use of three languages, sometimes forging them into one single form. Necessity has indeed been the mother of invention. Brincat rightly views language as part of a whole social system, the creative component of one integral identity. His account is equally linguistic and political. Maltese, as much as Italian and eventually English, is continuously evaluated as a document of history, of life in all its spheres. The implications of such an analysis are numerous, but the most interesting is perhaps the fact that the way the Maltese treated language was largely liberal and practical, determined by the dictates of circumstances, always open to adaptation and compromise. Language is therefore considered also in terms of its causative effect on identity in general.

Perhaps Professor Brincat is also contributing to the formation of a local philosophy of language. He has surely shown once again that Maltese is itself a patrimony of historical import, something which provides direct empirical evidence of the past. This may prove to be more so in the case of Malta, since Maltese has helped the tiny community also to survive as such. In any case, the non-linguistic evidence which can be derived from this fundamental book must be far-reaching and important to help in the completion of our modern discovery of past centuries.

It is mainly this anthropological vision of the history of language, indeed of languages in contact in Malta, which makes this work unique. It is remarkable in its own right as a contribution to the history of words in the island, but is equally worthy of attention for the way it puts Maltese at the very centre of intellectual activity throughout the centuries, even when Maltese lacked respect in all spheres – except in the field of human experience, particularly of the common folk. I believe this is the salient point where Professor Brincat reaches his major conclusion regarding the survival of Maltese, set between two major languages.

I am once more deeply impressed by Professor Brincat's high academic standard. I am equally moved to note how he manages to combine scientific detachment with a deep love for our country. That makes him indeed complete, both as a person and as a scholar.

**Oliver Friggieri**

**Sergio Portelli, *La stampa periodica in italiano a Malta*, Malta 2010, pp. 276, illustrated, ISBN 978-99909-45-58-4.**

Part of the history of the Italian newspapers and periodicals printed in Malta during the nineteenth century has already been published in the past by researchers who

include Bianca Fiorentini, Lorenzo Schiavone, Giuseppe Patti and Giovanni Mangion who concentrated mainly on the Italian Risorgimento years. However, this excellent study by Sergio Portelli, first conceived as a doctoral thesis, goes much further and delves deeper into the subject because it presents us with a complete picture of all the Italian publications that saw the light of day in Malta throughout the nineteenth century and up to the post-World War II years.

Dr Portelli has been very thorough in his research and duly acknowledges, in his notes and references, all the past publications about printing in Malta. His aim is not just a simple chronology or list of publications but an erudite discussion and analysis of the role of the "Italian Press" in the events Malta was involved in over circa a century and a half. The book is very logically and chronologically divided into seven chapters, thus evading flash-backs because, after all, this is a history book and not a novel.

The book begins by first analysing the position of local 'journalism' during the short French period of domination and the first decades of British rule and then goes on to spell out the fight for liberty of the press and its effect on the publication of the first real newspapers in Malta. The role of Italian refugees at Malta is expertly explained in the next two chapters together with their contribution to the spread and fuller development of local journalism. This is followed by the fifth chapter which deals with the Italian newspapers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The final two chapters concern the newspapers in Italian up till the commencement of World War II together with the twentieth-century literary periodicals up till the 1950s. All the chapters are amply based on documentary evidence that include primary sources, the newspapers themselves and published material which are very well-presented in footnotes that are clear and concise.

Throughout the book, there is the ever-presence of the local and international political background and its influence on the newspapers and journals. Indeed, this background is very important since it is the essence behind the development of the Italian publications on Malta. The author goes on to point out the editorial differences and policies of the various newspapers and also, sometimes, such details that include the page size and layout. We get to know the various editors, what made them tick so to speak, and how policies sometimes changed. Very important is the part played by these publications in the Language Question which ended with the elimination of the Italian language from its formerly dominant position at least in the local culture.



Dr Portelli's use of Italian is impeccable and his prose flows effortlessly and effectively. A commendable preface by Henry Frendo sets the tone of the publication and this is followed by an effective introduction to the subject. The book also contains nine illustrations of different journals but I would have expected the inclusion of other illustrative material such as, for example, the pictures of some protagonists such as Vittorio Barzoni, Francesco Crispi and Enrico Mizzi, to name but three, together with a few lithographs of important events such as the arrival of the 1836 Commission at Malta. On the other hand, printing is clear on good cartridge paper with a very readable point size together with a dignified coloured soft cover. The index of names is very good whilst the bibliography is very exhaustive and excellent.

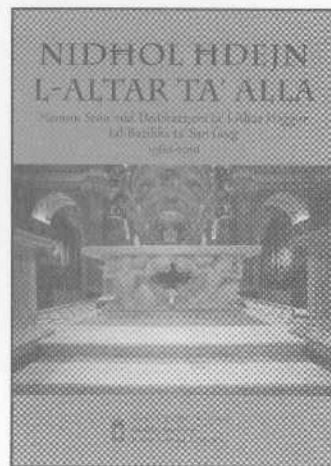
This book is most certainly to be recommended and a very important addition to our Melitensia.

**Joseph F. Grima**

**FRANCESCO PIO ATTARD (Ed.), *Nidhol hdejn l-Altar ta' Alla. Hamsin Sena mid-Dedikazzjoni ta' l-Altar Magġur tal-Bażilika ta' San Ġorġ 1960-2010, Historical and Cultural Committee – St George's Basilica, Victoria, Gozo (Malta) 2010.***

*Nidhol hdejn l-Altar ta' Alla. Hamsin Sena mid-Dedikazzjoni ta' l-Altar Magġur tal-Bażilika ta' San Ġorġ (1960-2010)* is the latest publication issued by the Historical and Cultural Committee of St George's Basilica in Victoria. It was precisely on 21 December 1960 that the then Bishop of Gozo, Mgr Ġużeppi Pace, dedicated the new altar of the basilica in the presence of a huge congregation that had gathered to witness this historic occasion.

The book has a presentation by Francesco Pio Attard, while Mgr Joseph Farrugia, archpriest emeritus of St George's Basilica, authored the preface in which he focuses mainly on the wider theological meaning of the altar and neatly ties this theme with the historical milieu in which the altar was conceived and designed by the able Roman sculptor and artist Professor Carlo Pisi. A lecturer in Fundamental Theology at the University of Malta, Mgr Farrugia does not hesitate to delve into the anthropological significance of the altar even within ancient and pagan religions. However, Farrugia stresses the superior theological significance of the altar



within the Christian religion. For those interested in the local history of Gozo and its ancient parish of St George, Mgr Farrugia's contribution is of the utmost importance since he does not fail to mention the Eastern and Greek background of the parish where Gozo's earliest Christian altar was erected.

Fr Roberto Gauci, a priest hailing from the parish of Ta' Kerċem who is the current master of ceremonies for the diocesan bishop of Gozo, presents an interesting and detailed study regarding the historical-liturgical aspect of the altar, mainly within the Christian milieu. The etymological roots of the term "altar" are tackled in a manner that is interesting to both the amateur and the professional reader of theology. The arguments regarding the orientation of the Eucharistic celebration are also well-tackled and take into consideration universally acclaimed publications about this particular theme, such as former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* which has been translated into various languages including Maltese. Rev Gauci has words of praise for the parish's decision to place the silver cross in the middle of the altar during liturgical celebrations, since this practice has not only been recommended by Pope Benedict XVI himself but also helps the faithful to have a specific focus during their participation in Holy Eucharist.

Fr Richard Nazzareno Farrugia from Xaghra, a student of Moral Theology at the *Accademia Alfonsiana* in Rome, is the author of the second study in the volume and writes about the sacrificial aspect of the altar, inspiring himself from the Second Vatican Council's important document about the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Farrugia tackles the image of the altar, the victim and the sacrifice as presented in the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews, a document whose importance can hardly be overestimated in this particular field of research. He also explains the role of the altar as the place of both the meal and the sacrifice, the latter concept being unwillingly compromised by some Catholic liturgists during the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council.

The second section of the book focuses more on the historical and artistic aspects of the "new" altar of St George's Basilica. It opens with a detailed chronology of the altar's history covering the period from April 1949 to July 1967 when Bishop Pace blessed the *baldacchino* which towers over the altar of St George's and which resembles Bernini's baroque canopy at St Peter's Basilica. Dr Eugene F. Montanaro is the author of a study on Claudio Durante, the designer of the former marble main altar of St George's parish; this article was reproduced from the 1989 issue of the *Programm Festi San Ġorġ Victoria-Ghawdex* issued by the *La Stella* Philharmonic Society. This old altar, dated to 1754, will eventually be permanently exhibited at the Basilica Museum which is still under construction. Paul Muscat M.A. wrote a short but important study focusing on the correspondence and receipts found in the parish archives regarding the commission of the Basilica's present altar and contextualizes the idea of the commission within the liturgical reform that took place in the Catholic Church at Vatican Council II and also in the light of the parish's erection to a *basilica minoris* by Pope Pius XII. This section ends with a study by Gozitan artist and researcher Mark Sagona M.A. who provides us with first-hand information about Carlo Pisi and his works and which is the best biographical sketch we currently have about this Roman artist.

The publication includes an appendix with useful information about various commemorative publications related to St George's followed by a list of the dedications of the altars of the parishes of the diocese of Gozo. Unfortunately, the book lacks an index.

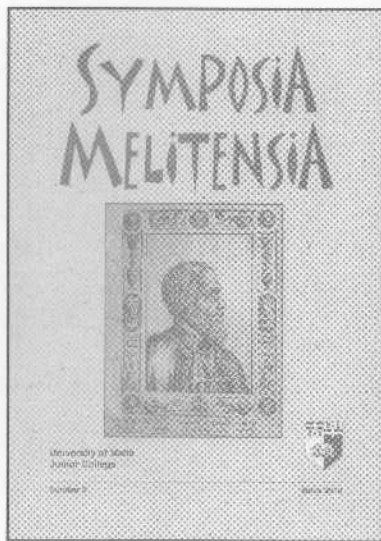
*Nidhol hdejn l-Altar ta' Alla*, with its attractive cover and very good presentation, is a must for all lovers of Gaultitana. The book has an attractive colour cover and is very well-presented. The photos – though in black and white – are clear and the majority are being published in book-form for the first time. The publication does not present heavy reading but, though it can easily be read in one sitting, one is advised not to do so because it is full of theological meanings and some parts of it actually make for meditative reading.

**Geoffrey G. Attard**

**Joe Zammit-Ciantar (editor), *Symposia Melitensia*, Number 6, University of Malta Junior College, Malta 2010, pp. ii + 142, ISSN: 1812-7509**

*Symposia Melitensia* is an annual academic journal published by the Junior College of the University of Malta that collates a number of researched papers connected with history, literature and culture, a number of which deal with aspects of Maltese History. This sixth number of the *Symposia* series, dated 2010, includes a number of welcome papers dealing with Maltese History.

The leading paper, 'L'Illustrazione degli Statuti dell'ordine gerosolimitano di Malta: didascalìa, celebrazione, ezornazione?' is written by Federica Formiga who discusses the imagery and iconographic representations in the Statutes of the Order of St John of Jerusalem and of Malta, published between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Particular attention was given to illustrative material that consisted of portraits, the depiction of dress forms, together with the figurative and symbolic depictions on the title pages that comprised coats-of-arms, mottoes, military trophies and religious symbols. The paper includes fourteen relevant plates.



Simon Mercieca writes about 'The Religious Cults of Thaumaturgical Powers and the Devotion towards St Nicholas of Bari in Malta' wherein he explores the development of religious cult statues in Malta with particular reference to the use of the *imagen a vestir* statues. The author does not, however, include Holy Week statues in his survey but limits himself to other processional statues, including titular saints and Our Lady under various titles but with special attention devoted to the statue of St Nicholas at Siġġiewi. A relatively short paper by Alessia Facineroso deals with 'The Sicilian Revolution of 1848 as seen from Malta'. One must remember the presence of a number of Italian exiles living in Malta which shot up to over 600 in 1849 after the failure of this anti-Bourbon revolt.

Two papers about literature are important in a historical context too. Josette Attard writes an analysis about how M.A. Vassalli developed the concept of language in his two publications of 1796 and 1828 in her study entitled 'Mikiel Anton Vassalli u l-Qagħda Lingwistika f'Malta ta' Żmienu'. In his 'Maltese Literature under the Order of St John', Oliver Friggieri explores the Italian tradition, the existence of academies and cultural societies, early works in Maltese, the epic motive and how, in the late eighteenth century, Maltese started to gain the respect of the intelligentsia and to be used for literary purposes on a widening scale.

Editor Joe Zammit-Ciantar, in his 'The Names of the Town and Villages of Gozo (Malta)', discusses a hypothetical etymology and a descriptive linguistic picture of each name together with the relationship every one of them has within the prismatic context of the Maltese language, particularly toponymy. However, I feel that the author has been rather too hasty in accepting (on page 81) the thesis of an unbroken habitation of Malta, especially Gozo, when this thorny item is still subject to a vigorous ongoing debate and the final word on it is still far from being pronounced.

Four other papers deal with non-historical subjects but, although each one is interesting in its own right, I shall not comment about them. All the papers (including the four I have not commented on) are profusely annotated with references in footnotes that not simply conform to the house style adopted by the editorial board but demonstrate quite clearly that the papers are based on sound research. The cover, general printing and lay-out are clear and neat with no real noticeable mistakes.

*Symposia Melitensia* is, in my opinion, a very useful and worthwhile addition to our melitensia.

**Joseph F. Grima**