

U MULU DI MALTA: THE MALTESE TRADE IN DONKEYS AND MULES

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Since times immemorial the Maltese islands were heavily dependent on the importation of food from abroad which was carried out by means of seaward communications. Thus, until modern times inland transport has played second fiddle and was for long stretches of time, even neglected, by various administrations ruling the islands.

Perhaps the best example can be elicited from the rule of the Hospitaller Order of St John. On its advent in Malta, in 1530, the Order hastened to create an efficient maritime communication system thanks to which, the fast developing harbour area was kept *au courant* of events in Europe. The net result was the creation of two separate mentalities. While the harbour towns developed into a veritable centre of activity which could be compared to any other south European coastal urban centre, the countryside, often referred to as the *campagna*, remained cut-off from European cross-currents. Here, the commonest means of transport was by means of pack animals.

The donkey has since been associated with the backwardness of the rustic folk. Dun Xand Cortis, writing in the late nineteenth century, recalls two tales where, on hearing donkeys braying, urban youths attempt to ridicule their peasant owners on a visit to town. In both instances, the peasants sagaciously answered that the donkeys were particularly delighted to meet their next of kin.¹

Cortis was obviously keen to highlight the dignity of the rustic peasants who were often associated with backwardness but who had also become synonymous with Maltese culture. Yet Cortis provides evidence that there was a tacit consent, amongst peasants and urbanites alike, on the stupidity of the donkey. Idioms like *inorant daqs hmar* (lit. as stupid as a donkey); or *hmar mort u mija gejt* (lit. you left as stupid as a donkey and you returned even worse) can prove this point. In reality, however, the donkey and its hybrid - the mule - have since time immemorial also been associated

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1. G. Mifsud Chircop, *Il-Praspar miktuba minn Dun Xand Cortis* (Malta, 1991).

with hard work. Thus one who works hard is *bhall-hmar tas-sienja* (lit. like a donkey at the treshing floor) or *jahdem daqs baghal* (lit. he works like a mule). All in all such like idioms reflect a close relationship between the Maltese peasant and the mule or donkey, which he used for most of his activities whether in farming or as a means of transport.

It should be stressed that beasts of burden, usually mules and donkeys, had been in common use all over the Mediterranean region ever since antiquity. They were the normal means of transport used for bulky goods in the inland regions. Due to the rough surfacing of roads, overland traffic and the network of communications, went at a snail's pace. Braudel argues that, 'Overland transport is usually represented as inefficient' . . . further stressing that, 'for centuries, roads remained, more or less, in a state of nature'.² Such conditions governed and burdened commercial exchanges and human relations.

But, the bad state of roads and the primitive means of transport continued to hamper every kind of human activity at least until the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The state of roads was so precarious that the eighteenth century economist Adam Smith commented that 'to travel on horseback, mules are the only conveyance which can safely be trusted'.³ Indeed, distance was the main problem faced by travellers even in a tiny island the size of Malta where already in the late fifteenth century those arriving at the Malta harbour from abroad could hire donkeys for their walk up to Mdina, eight miles inland.⁴ In winter time travel by mule, donkey and carriage must have been particularly difficult. This explains why in 1575, the Rabat parish priest found it difficult to travel to nearby Dingli at that time of the year. It was often impossible for him to attend to his duties, such as, the administration of the extreme unction.⁵

In sixteenth - century Europe, roads seem to have increased in volume such that the demand for beasts of burden reached unprecedented popularity. The sharp rise of the mule and donkey population of Italy was considered a calamity in the epoch of Charles V, and in order to save horse breeding, rich Neapolitans were forbidden, under pain of severe penalties to use mules to pull their carriages.⁶ All over the continent

2. F. Braudel, *Civilisation and capitalism* vol. ii: *The wheels of commerce*. trans. S. Reynolds (London, 1982), p. 350.

3. A. Smith, *The wealth of nations* vol. ii (London, 1937 edition), p. 217.

4. G. Wetinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the late Middle Ages', M. Buhagiar (ed.), *Proceedings of history week* 1981 (Malta, 1982), p. 41.

5. N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta), Libr(ary) Ms. 643, p. 286.

6. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*. trans. S. Reynolds vol. i (Glasgow, 1972), p. 284.

governments were keen to oblige rich citizens, who could afford the upkeep of horses, to own at least one horse.⁷

An insight of the situation obtaining in Malta can be gained from a report prepared by Count Alva, the Viceroy of Sicily in 1590. In it Alva informs Philip II that the Order's pretensions for '4,000 *salme* of barley to feed the horses is too high since the Maltese cavalry is small and the inhabitants breed donkeys above all else'.⁸ Yet, Alva adds that a small force of cavalry was needed for hand-to-hand combat. Indeed, the dire shortage of horses on the island seems to have preoccupied the Order's administration. Hence in a letter of December 1598, Grand Master Garzes obliges his envoy in Palermo to procure a few stallions for breeding purposes from Sicily.⁹

The shortage of horses in Malta remained a major preoccupation until at least the seventeenth century. In a brief to Bishop Balaguer (1635 - 1663) dated 4 June 1638, Pope Urban VIII decreed that clerics should be obliged to serve in the militia. The brief was written in response to a claim put forward by Grand Master Lascaris (1636-1657) that the better-off Maltese were joining the ranks of the clergy as minor clerics in order to be exempted from military service. This had resulted in a rapid decline of the militia cavalry which from a corps of around 600 men at the time of the siege of 1565 had been reduced to a mere 130 by 1638.¹⁰ By 1640 Grand Master Lascaris even issued an edict in which he proclaimed that horses should not be exported without a licence.¹¹ In fact official documentation for the period 1589-1611 indicates how only a negligible number of horses were exported out of the island during that period. Meanwhile the edict issued under Lascaris indirectly confirms that pack animals were undoubtedly the regular means of inland transport. Probably their popularity lay in the fact that they were cheaper in price and easy to maintain. Mules, in particular, were especially in demand due to their sturdy nature. Thus, we are told that they were then widely used for agriculture in Spain, Languedoc and elsewhere in Europe.¹² These animals were excellent for the use of 'large transports' on the Alps and became so popular that she-mules are recorded to have been sent from Sicily for the works being carried out at La Goulette, in Tunisia, in 1592.¹³

7. NLM Libr. Ms. 148, fol. 57.

8. NLM Univ(ersità) 15, fol. 190v.

9. NLM A(rchives of the) O(rder of) M(alta) 1378, unpaginated.

10. C(athedral) A(rchives) M(dina), Gius(patronati) Misc. vol. 3, fol. 495.

11. NLM Libr. 148, fol. 58.

12. F. Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism: vol. i: The structures of everyday life*. trans. S. Reynolds (London, 1983), p. 350.

13. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, vol. i, p. 284.

Apart from being an agricultural aid, the mule was a marvellous pack animal, strong and docile, described by the French sixteenth century writer François Rabelais, as 'a more powerful less delicate beast than any other, and one capable of harder work'. The great sea - port of Genoa is reported to have owed her existence not in only to ships but also to the mule-trains which inside the city had to use the brick paths reserved for them. Mule trains were also very important as part of the traffic passing through Messina and the Sicilian channel. Mule traffic, although apparently small in volume, or value, was decisive for communication in the Mediterranean world.¹⁵

Trade between Malta and Sicily

In Malta, beasts of burden, particularly donkeys, seemed to have been reared on a wide scale. A. Dent puts forth an interesting theory of how the Maltese beasts of burden came into being:

'It has been surmised that these asses (of Malta) were once identical with the Catalanian race, and were brought from Spain, but no one has hazarded a guess as to when this happened... Malta at one time was a base for the far travelling Phoenician merchants, who had business also in Spain, and it seems probable that they will first have brought selected Syrian asses to the island and later brought their progeny westward to the Iberian peninsula'.¹⁶

Whatever the origins, the tenth century Arab chronicler Ibn Hauqal, is reported to have described Malta as a place which was 'inhabited only by savage donkeys, numerous sheep, and bees'. A.T. Luttrell adds that 'visitors, presumably from Sicily, did come (to Malta) bringing their own provisions, to collect honey and hunt the sheep, which were scarcely marketable, and the donkeys which were exported and sold. . .'¹⁷

By the thirteenth century, the situation appears to have altered substantially. H. Bresc comments that, 'it was cotton, even more than the rearing of mules and donkeys, which provided the Maltese islands with an income capable of balancing their expenditure on grain'.¹⁸

14. F. Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book iv, chapter 61 (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 580.

15. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, vol. i, pp. 134, 317.

16. A. Dent, *Donkey: The story of the ass from east to west* (London, 1972), pp. 152-53. (Kindly brought to my attention by Prof. P. Serracino-Ingloft).

17. A. Luttrell, 'Ibn Hauqal and Tenth Century Malta', *Hyphen - A journal of melitensia and the humanities*, vol. v, no. 4 (Malta, 1987), pp. 157-60.

18. H. Bresc, 'The secrezia and the royal patrimony in Malta: 1240 - 1450', in A. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta - studies on Malta before the knights* (London, 1975), p. 132.

Nevertheless, evidence suggests that beasts of burden were by then the normal means for transporting goods and they appear frequently in contracts of sale. Although G. Wettinger complains that statistical information is difficult to arrive at, mules were much in demand, 'especially for driving mills that ground wheat and barley before the introduction of the windmill. Of course they were also quite suitable for much of the work in the fields, but they often were far more important'. Wettinger elaborates further stating that donkeys seem to have been even more popular in the fifteenth century since, 'practically everyone must have owned a donkey... They were also used for transporting goods by professional carriers'.¹⁹ By and large, Malta's exportation of mules and donkeys seems to have been significant, while at the same time, the island had to import horses which were needed for a mounted force.²⁰

The advent of the Hospitaller Order of St John in 1530 with its inflow of foreigners to the Maltese islands, had a dramatic effect in that it managed to transform Malta into a trading centre of some value.²¹ This situation must have surely led to an increase in the mule and donkey trade of the islands. The diarist of the siege F. Balbi di Correggio refers to the use of beasts of burden by the Ottomans, which according to him had been abandoned in the countryside by the Maltese in their haste to reach the safety of the fortified towns. We are told that the beasts were used:

*'to transport heavy artillery from the fleet to St Elmo. It was no light task, for the guns were heavy, and their wheels and carriages were re-inforced with iron. The distance they had to cover was nine miles, and the ground was very rough and full of stones.'*²²

The horses, donkeys and mules of Malta seem to have had a high reputation for good hoofs. A traveller to Malta in 1582 referred to the fact that the beasts of burden of Malta had no need for horse-shoes.²³

Scattered information regarding mule and donkey trade is found in the *Registri Patentarum* of the *Magna Curia Castellania*. These registers contain information about vessels and passengers leaving the Malta harbour (excluding the Order's galley squadron) indicating their destination. The passenger lists for each departing vessel

19. Wettinger, *ibid.* p. 40.

20. *Ibid.*

21. D. Cutajar and C. Cassar, 'Malta and the 16th century struggle for the Mediterranean', *Mid-Med Bank Limited: Report and accounts 1985* (Malta, 1985), p. 29.

22. F. Balbi di Correggio, *The siege of Malta 1565*. Eng. trans. H.A. Balbi (Copenhagen, 1961), p. 216.

23. L. Sandri, 'Due relazioni inedite su Malta', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, n. s. vol. ix (Rome, 1938), p. 216.

sometimes included information on bulky merchandise which was intended to be embarked to one of the nearby Sicilian ports, Italy or Marseilles. Beasts of burden were considered as bulky merchandise and great care was taken to describe their colour, sex and whether they were mules, donkeys, or more rarely, horses. Although the first volume of these registers dates from 1564, information on such animals is first registered in 1589. All in all, for all its mishaps and inconsistencies, the available documentation may help to give a better understanding of the manner this business was run.

Between 1589 and 1611, a total of 146 trips made by vessels which departed from the Malta harbour transported 957 beasts of burden. Sometimes one particular vessel would carry animals belonging to different owners. The destination was often indicated though somewhat in a vague manner. In all, 58 traders stated their intention of going to the Kingdom of Sicily while 65 mentioned a specific port. The latter could be subdivided as follows: 44 indicated Licata; 15 Terranova (Gela); 8 Girgenti (Agrigento); 8 Scicli; 6 Pozzallo; 2 Mazzara (Mazzara del Vallo); 1 Syracuse; 1 Spaccafurno; 1 Naples; 2 Marseilles and another stated rather vaguely that he intended to go *fuori regno*, that is, outside the Kingdom of Sicily of which Malta then formed part. As can be noticed, vessels used to make trips mostly to nearby ports of call in Sicily above all else.

The data in Table I gives the impression that donkeys were by far the most popular beasts of burden of the Maltese islands. They make a total percentage of 76.5 of the total number of animals exported from Malta between 1589 and 1611. Followed by mules which formed 20.8 per cent and a mere 0.6 per cent of horses, while 2.1 per cent of beasts of burden are unspecified. Donkeys must have been in great demand in Sicily and other Mediterranean lands, perhaps due to their cheap cost of maintenance as well as their relatively cheap price vis-a-vis other beasts of burden. A good comparison of prices is given in the case of Agustino Darmanin who, just before the siege of Malta of 1565, bought a donkey from Pietro Zammit for 15 scudi.²⁴ This compares poorly with the 50 scudi paid by Domenico Caruana for a *giumenta* (pregnant mare).²⁵

The exportation of donkeys from Malta seems to have been a profitable business. Yet, the growing population of the islands helped to increase the emphasis of the major cash crop of the island - cotton. Cotton could be sold to other lands in the Mediterranean for a profit and it was in turn used to buy grain from Sicily. Available evidence suggests that trade in beasts of burden was carried out in the same manner as trade in other merchandise. The evidence given by Agata Mallia on 17th February 1600

24. N(ational) A(rchives) M(dina), M(agna) C(uria) C(astellania), Ced. Supp. et Tax., vol. iii, fols. 137 - 37v; 15 January, 1568.

25. *Ibid.*, fols. 46 - 6v; 26 October, 1566.

Table I:

| Year | Merchants | Padroni of Vessels | Trips | Mules | Donkeys | Horses | Type Unknown |
|--------|-----------|-----------------------|-------|-------|---------|--------|-----------------|
| 1589 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 9 | - | - |
| 1590 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 | - | - |
| 1591 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | - |
| 1592 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 1593 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 1594 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 12 | 16 | - | - |
| 1595 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 1596 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 7 | 16 | - | - |
| 1597 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 48 | 1 | - |
| 1598 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 19 | 60 | - | - |
| 1599 | 8 | 7 | 10 | 17 | 32 | - | - |
| 1600 | 22 | 11 | 29 | 28 | 146 | 3 | - |
| 1601 | 5 | 8 | 11 | 9 | 43 | - | - |
| 1602 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 17 | 12 | - | - |
| 1603 | 4 | 4 | 4 | - | 18 | - | - |
| 1604 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 23 | - | - |
| 1605 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 25 | - | - |
| 1606 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 107 | - | - |
| 1607 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 21 | 45 | - | - |
| 1608 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | - | - | - |
| 1609 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 11 | 29 | - | 20 |
| 1610 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 9 | 54 | 1 | - |
| 1611 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 46 | 1 | - |
| Totals | 123 | 110 | 146 | 199 | 732 | 6 | 20 |

Sources: MCC Reg. Patentarium II - IV: 1581 -1611.

shows how this procedure was performed. Her husband Georgio, bought animals on credit from various traders to sell them in Sicily. On his return trip, Georgio Mallia would then buy the merchandise with which he would return to Malta for business.²⁶

It is significant however to point out that the trade in beasts of burden seems to have had its ups and downs as the table below indicates.

Table II:

| Year | Mules | Donkeys | Horses | Other | Total | Percentage |
|-----------|-------|---------|--------|-------|-------|------------|
| 1589-1595 | 18 | 28 | - | - | 46 | 4.8% |
| 1596-1600 | 77 | 302 | 3 | - | 382 | 40.0% |
| 1601-1605 | 35 | 121 | 1 | - | 157 | 16.4% |
| 1606-1611 | 69 | 281 | 2 | 20 | 372 | 38.8% |
| Totals: | 199 | 732 | 6 | 20 | 957 | 100.0% |

Source: MCC Reg. Patentarium II - IV: 1581 - 1611.

Business in donkeys seems to have expanded in the centuries that followed and, at least, until the early years of British rule. In fact T. Mac Gill writing in 1839 reports that Maltese donkeys continued, 'to be exported to different parts of Europe and America'.²⁷ That the Maltese donkey was exported to America can be confirmed by A. Dent who asserts that in 1786 General Washington - who already owned a Spanish jack ass - was presented with a Maltese donkey by the French Marquis Lafayette, the hero of the American Revolutionary War, 'thus putting him in possession of specimens of the two leading European strains'.²⁸

The Maltese mule was similarly highly reputed particularly in Sicily where the peasants still refer to the sturdy nature of *u mulu di Malta*. The reputation of Maltese mules, and especially donkeys, seems to have been so high that by 1915 J. Borg could claim that they 'were in former days claimed to be the best in the world'. Borg complains however that the 'local' breed, 'has been much reduced by the heavy purchases of foreign breeders'.²⁹

26. *Ibid.*, vol. vi, unpaginated: 17th February, 1600.

27. T. Mac Gill, *A handbook or guide for strangers visiting Malta* (Malta, 1839), p. 13.

28. Dent, *ibid.*, p. 107.

29. J. Borg, 'Agriculture and horticulture in Malta', A Macmillan (ed.), *Malta and Gibraltar Illustrated* (London, 1915), p. 238.

This early twentieth - century Maltese scholar tends to overlook a more basic factor which led to the rapid decline of the mule, and particularly, the donkey population of Malta. By then, the Maltese islands had been firmly established as a British colony for over a century, at a time when Britain was not only considered to be 'the workshop of the world', but it also possessed the largest colonial empire of the period.

Although properly speaking, industrialization had very little impact on the Maltese economy, the internal communication system saw a gradual development under British rule. Some roads were improved for military purposes, others were constructed to serve new settlements, but by and large, the system of tracks, which the islands had acquired over the centuries, was adapted to modern needs." British imperial policy exploited Malta's strategic development as a coaling station, and in enlarging its role as a major point of strength on the route to India, In such circumstances, it proved essential to quicken the process of urbanization initiated by the Hospitaller Order of St John. For a long time, the Maltese countryside was left to linger behind in a pre-industrial economy while the growth of the suburbs and the strengthening of the non-agricultural element in rural areas began to take root. The modernization of economic life changed thanks to a highly demanding dockyard and expansion within the harbour, as well as a general improvement in the internal system of transport,"

The net result was that the local industries tied to the old agricultural pattern had begun to die out, while more people found employment with the colonial government. In this way the Maltese rural economy, heavily dependent on sources of energy derived from animals and plants, was slowly replaced by an industrial society relying exclusively on inanimate fossil fuels. The railway, the steamship, telegraphy, the telephone and buses were determinant in the transformation of inland communications making the less efficient service, originally provided by beasts of burden, redundant.

30. C. Cassar, 'Everyday life in Malta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.). *The British colonial experience 1800-1964: The impact on Maltese society* (Malta, 1988 \ p. 112.

31. II. U Owen-Jones. J. C. Dewdney, W. B. Fisher (eds), *Malta: Background for development* (Durham. 1961), p. 123