

BOOK REVIEWS  
WITCHES AND INQUISITORS

Carmel Cassar: *Witchcraft, sorcery and the Inquisition. A study of cultural values in early modern Malta*. Mireva Publications, Malta, 1996, xiv + 121pp. Illus.

Magic pervaded all strata of society and culture in early modern Europe. The present work by Carmel Cassar is an attempt to study its uses, cultural significance and social implications in the Maltese, and at the same time, in a wider Mediterranean and European context.

Cassar uses an interdisciplinary approach, using historical, sociological and anthropological concepts so as to cover various aspects of life. The Inquisition archives have proved themselves to be a mine of information for the ethno-historian, as they provide unique insights and a richer view of human experience than most other manuscript collections. A fine example are some unique references to antique Maltese verse, which will surely be a delicacy to local scholars on the development of the written Maltese language.

Maltese scholarship was still far back in works of this type. Up till now studies on the Holy Office tended to concentrate on the Tribunal as an institution for itself, or else of descriptive nature with little or no interpretation. Here precisely lies the merit of this work. Indeed the subtitle, *A study of cultural values*, is perhaps more important and revealing than the first title. For this is a study on the perceptions, values and collective behaviour of the Maltese people and on how and why they reacted to the various adversities of life by resorting to what they considered to be an effective remedy - magic in all its various forms.

Such studies generally ignore a strictly quantitative approach and are deliberately qualitative. Concentrating on specific case studies enables one to obtain greater depth as well as more colour and life. In this case the two magnificent case studies of Betta Caloïro and Vittorio Cassar are perhaps models of how the individual can be used to elucidate broader structures while at the same time avoiding the abstractness of much social history.

After a general introduction on the Tribunal of the Inquisition and religion in Malta, the book is divided mainly in two parts. The first part discusses magic and healing rituals. The chief concern of the Inquisition was to reform popular witchcraft beliefs and making them conform to the

official theological notions of religion as put forward by the Council of Trent. The Church taught that she alone had the power to combat sorcery, which was interpreted as being the devil's work. The only remedy were the sacraments, which had to be administered by the clergy. However this was not enough for early modern folk who wanted a more spontaneous access to the supernatural. With this end in mind they often made recourse to 'superstitious' means - brilliantly disguised by prayers and invocation to saints - to overcome all sorts of misfortunes. The devil rarely appears in these rituals, and when he does, as the case of Farfarello points out, he is always figured as the mischievous trickster of folklore rather than as the source of all diabolic power as envisaged by Trent. Popular magic complemented, rather than competed against, the role of the Church in society.

The second part of the book deals with learned or elite magic. There was no clear demarcation line between popular and elite magic. Both sought to bring order in one's life by addressing the power of the sacred. Popular magic was a primarily female occupation which was transmitted orally, especially healing methods. Learned magic, on the other hand, was an entirely male phenomenon, practised by the educated sectors of society, including the clergy. It was taught, and it exploited the magical resources of literacy. Hand in hand with learned magic went prohibited magical texts which were fundamental for the carrying out of these rituals. Those who practised elite magic, in fact, claimed a scientific method, and employed all the resources of their knowledge in magic and astrology in their experiments. Potentially, therefore, it was a much more serious affair for the Church, as it had a more elaborate cosmology which established it as a rival to organized religion. The case of Fra Vittorio Cassar explains these concepts in more detail.

This study shows that religion mingled with magic in a struggle against daily afflictions and the onslaught of climate and mortality. 'Official' and 'popular' religion interacted and borrowed from each other, as did 'popular' and 'learned' magic. Satan never enjoyed an important part in these rituals. The post-Tridentine Church, by means of the Inquisition, was at least partially successful in making the people conform outwardly to its official doctrines. But its aim at eradicating what it labelled as 'superstition' had the least impact on society in general. While learned magic underwent a steady decline in front of the advance of science, popular magic beliefs linger on

until the present day.

*Witchcraft, sorcery and the Inquisition* by Carmel Cassar sheds light on a period when Malta was forming itself as a state with an identity of its own. It is hoped that this book gets the publicity it deserves abroad so that foreign scholars may finally get to know something about Malta and start to include it in their studies. It is also hoped, as the author points out, that this study encourages further research in the history of cultural values and beliefs, so that the Maltese people could understand better his origins.

Kenneth Gambin

## THE POST-WAR TREASON TRIALS

Laurence Mizzi, the biographer of the war-time Maltese pro-Italian 'spy' Carmelo Borg Pisani - an artist and dreamy idealist and irredentist - has now documented for us the basic goings-on in the so-called 'treason' or 'sedition' trials of 1946-47. His book is entitled: Mixlija b'Kongura u Tradiment [P.E.G., 1996] and contains 223 pages of text, including a name index.

It is important for this story to be told because of the many and varied ramifications of 'italianita' we have had over the decades. In war-time, sympathies and sentiments take a different turn, not less because they risk being caught up in an almost uncontrollable web of emotions, militarism, survival and intrigue. No sooner had Italy surrendered and the Allies' advance was assured that senior members of the Malta police force - Axisa, de Gray, Calleja - were despatched to Italy by British Field Security to ferret out Maltese nationals who had supported the Italian war effort. They netted in all seventeen Maltese who were in Italy during the war, and dragged them to Malta for trial on grounds of disloyalty to the British king. In the case of eleven of them, the Maltese prosecuting officers, who served the Crown, asked for death by hanging. In four jury trials, however, all the accused were acquitted, many of them returning to Italy.

The biggest catch of all would have been Dr Carlo Mallia, a former Nationalist minister who like some other Nationalists suffered at British hands in the mid-1930s; he went to Italy and became a confirmed Fascist official, who pressured the Maltese in Italy to hand in their British passports in return for a monthly allowance and, more importantly, being saved from the POW 'concentration' camps. However, Mallia escaped the net - he stayed in Italy and was never tried.

Practically all those who were Italian scholarship holders in universities would automatically have been regarded as members of the GUF [Gioventu' Universitaria Fascista] while those Maltese who had traded in their passports rather than go to jail out of loyalty to the British king, ended up members of the CAM [Comitato d'Azione Maltese], led by a Foreign Ministry official, Prof. Umberto Biscottini, aided however by Dr Mallia and some others. Some Maltese, like Dr Carlo Liberto and Dr Camillo Bonanno, had taken Italian citizenship before the war, so they were free to serve the regime as they liked, and as they did, but they could not be arrested for it. A few

were genuinely pro-Fascist, but most weren't that keen on Fascism, and of those arrested some would have been sceptical if not opposed to it. One or two even rallied 'underground' to the allied cause, especially it seems Giuseppe Gonzi, who was in Rome on behalf of the Banco di Roma, which had a branch in Valletta before the war. Another, Willie Apap, was one of Malta's leading painters and did not shirk from taking on commissions or exhibiting his paintings at the quarters of the Regia Deputazione per la Storia di Malta at the Palazzo Antici Mattei, the same building where the CAM was lodged - and where now the Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea is housed, in Via Michelangelo Caetani.

As the Maltese 'collaborators' knew English they were useful as interpreters and translators, even as broadcasters, but several were sent on field training and some saw battle. None were particularly enthusiastic to fight for Italy, or for anyone: their enthusiasm to serve the Fascist cause may be evenly counter-weighted by their reluctance to suffer for the British one. To a large extent, most of them were caught between two stools. Some had not been born in Malta and had direct familial Italian connections - for example Edoardo Frendo and Manoel Mizzi - so of course they could hardly have supported the British. But there was a fine line to be drawn between sympathy and forced support, or even membership of some action committee, or attending a Sette Giugno commemoration, or the unveiling of a bust to the PN founding father Dr Fortunato Mizzi [d.1905] at the Pincio Gardens in Rome, or an odd, touched-up article for the Rome Malta newspaper, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the necessary proofs at law of outright sedition or treason: that is the act of willingly wanting and actively seeking to overthrow the government of His Britannic Majesty. [As it happened, several of the accused got their Maltese-British passports back once the war came to an end.]

And least of all, the Maltese jurors must have felt, was there much scope in splitting hairs about all that in the wake of a devastating war, which had by then not even landed Malta with a promised self-government constitution, while discharges from the dockyard by the thousand were on the way.

Mizzi's text is based almost exclusively on reports of the trials in the Progress Press newspaper *Il-Berqa*. His book is well illustrated, including some telling Willie Apap sketches, drawn even in the court-room. The war years and the immediate post-war need a proper academic job done on

them from archival and even oral sources, in Rome as much as in Valletta, so that a more comprehensive account can result, but Mizzi's book is certainly a good starting-point for that.

One of the greatest and perhaps saddest ironies in this story is that it was none other than Carmelo Borg Pisani himself who, once under British hands, had squealed much of the information on which British Intelligence later acted to try and round up his fellow 'traitors'. He paid for his deeds with his life, but those whose names he had revealed were acquitted.

As Albert Ganado notes in an introduction to Mizzi's book, whereas Maltese nationalists suspected of disloyalty were deported without charge and risked their lives and their health in the bomb-infested seas, those who actually aided and abetted the enemy somehow or other in Italy itself ended up scot free.

The main prosecutors were Dr [later Sir] Anthony Mamo, who became Malta's first President and Head of State in 1974; and Dr William Buhagiar, the son of Dr Francesco Buhagiar, who had served as Malta's second [Nationalist] prime minister in the early twenties. Buhagiar later joined the Colonial Service as a Judge and went on to become President of the Courts in Emperor Selaisse's Ethiopia, before retiring in Geneva where he died.

**Henry Frendo**

#### MALTA: THE COMING OF THE BRITISH

DESMOND GREGORY: MALTA, BRITAIN, AND THE EUROPEAN POWERS, 1798-1815 [Associated University Presses, London, New Jersey & Toronto, 1996, Lstg. 39.50]

Desmond Gregory, the author of this empirically and meticulously researched conventional history volume on Malta in the Napoleonic era, is no newcomer either to the region or to the period under review. More perhaps than any other living British author, he has concerned himself with Franco-British and other interests in strategically-placed Mediterranean islands, especially Corsica [1985], Sicily [1988], Minorca [1990], and now Malta, before the Congress of Vienna settlements. In this most recent work Gregory, an octogenarian, draws easily for comparative purposes on information from his earlier writings, and in this respect the Malta book be the most 'mature' of the lot. Britain's overriding objectives were to contain, neutralise or defeat French naval and maritime exploits in the Mediterranean. Doing this by means of territorial acquisition or control was a rather experimental process. Except in Malta's case, it was neither a particularly successful nor indeed a lasting one. In Malta too, however, much uncertainty prevailed as to long-term objectives. Malta with its harbours in the central Mediterranean, between Sicily and Egypt, needed to be freed from French rule; but other than that, would Britain then wish to stay there itself, as a colonial power? Initially, in London, there was every intention to finish the job and get out, Minorca being generally regarded as a more feasible location from which to watch and guard the French fleet in and off Toulon. In spite of persistent advice to the contrary from some British officials on the spot, most notably Captain Alexander Ball, who had been involved on the side of the Maltese anti-French insurrection since 1799, the British intention to leave Malta was made amply clear by article 10 of the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. Not only would Britain leave: the Order of St John, whom Bonaparte had expelled on his way to conquer Egypt in 1798, would return! Malta's neutrality would be guaranteed by the Great Powers, including Britain, France and Russia, whose Czar Paul I was fascinated by the Knights of Malta. There would also be a Maltese representation in the government of the islands. What Britain sought to achieve by such an accommodation was above all peace - an end to the Second Coalition against France. Whether that was merely wishful thinking or not time would soon tell. The Maltese

insurgent leaders, who had seen thousands of their compatriots lose their lives until a British naval blockade of Valletta finally forced the French commander to surrender, were not impressed at all. In an historic Declaration of Rights signed by the town and village representatives in June 1802, they held that they had never empowered the British to dispose of their country to third parties: they had sought British protection and assistance to fight off the French, but if the British wished to depart, sovereignty would revert to them as citizens. That was their understanding of the Anglo-Maltese pact which had seen British intervention, at their very request, and after due permission had been obtained from their then lawful sovereign, the King of the Two Sicilies. Moreover, they could not understand how a popped up Order would ever be able to defend their islands against a renewed French attack, it having so miserably failed to do so in 1798. Gregory's account is essentially about how the British came to stay: how they sought to assume control preferably without antagonising those who had asked them over; when protectors became overlords how could governance be reconciled with loyal allegiance. By the time Valletta surrendered [on 5 September 1800 after a two year siege, in which Neapolitan troops had also participated] 'the British government had decided that, while hostilities lasted, British sovereignty in Malta must be proclaimed,' Gregory writes. 'The relevant claims by the King of Sicily were to be ignored and set aside.' The explanation that Britain could not have allowed Sicily's flag to be raised without offending the Russian czar was 'palpably false'. The Maltese themselves were completely excluded from the capitulation and in no way consulted. Yet on 9 June 1802 London informed its civil commissioner in Valletta that the islands were to be restored to the Knights and Gapt. Ball would become to Malta shortly as minister-plenipotentiary to the Order. But when less than a year later, Britain finally severed diplomatic relations with France, even the Neapolitan troops were instructed to depart. Napoleon's exploits in Parma and Piedmont, his continuing presence in Holland, fears of renewed French interests in Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean including the Ionian Islands and Turkey, gave Britain cold feet. Bent on a volte face over Malta, she asked Bonaparte for 'compensation', the First Consul told her ambassador in Paris that he would rather see the British in the Faubourg Saint Germain, in the outskirts of Paris, rather than acquiesce in Britain's retention of Malta. Nelson became equally convinced that Malta 'must never belong to France', and

Pitt thought like Gregory describes in considerable detail various aspects of life in Malta during the early British occupation, especially before and after 1803, until the matter was decisively settled by international treaty in 1815. He treats of the different administrations, civil and military aspects, commercial and economic developments particularly during the Continental Blockade when Malta's importance as an entrepot centre soared and corporate banking came into being, relations with the church, hospitals, quarantine and the plague, and the reforming, despotic zeal of the first governor, 'King Tom' Maitland. He then looks at Malta as a British naval and military base during this formative period when the islands were being incorporated as a Crown Colony. In his concluding chapter entitled 'the price of protection' while trying hard not to sound patronising although relying mainly on British sources, Gregory sums up and apportions the odds in the early British occupation from both a British and a Maltese viewpoint. This book [which also includes an appendix on the island of Lampedusa which at one point might have been annexed to Malta] is probably the most comprehensive and detailed account on Malta during this agitated period in English; it is also quite useful for purposes of local history. And it is timely, because September 1998 marks the bicentenary of the Maltese insurrection against French rule. Other parts of Europe, such as the city of Verona in April 1997, already duly commemorated similar uprisings.

**Henry Frendo**