VALLETTA: A Catalyst in the Central Mediterranean and the Hospitaller Order of St. John (1530-1798)

Carmel Cassar | Malta Univ.

The sixteenth and seventeenth century Mediterranean has been described as 'a battleground' between the two great empires of Catholic Spain in the west and the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the east. It was an age during which the two great empires, supported by their respective allies, gave evidence of their formidable might.

Before the rise of the Habsburg kings, Charles V and Philip II, the Catholic Kings of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, who were responsible for the unification of Spain, played as vital a part in creating the Spanish Empire. They were responsible for the establishment of various Christian enclaves along the North African coast stretching from Morocco to Tripoli (Libya). Likewise, the Ottoman Sultans, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, were intent in expelling the remaining satellite territories of the Christian minor powers, particularly Venice, and by 1522 managed to expunge Knights Hospitallers of St John from, and its territories, in the Dodecanese and the tip of Anatolia.

When in 1530, Emperor Charles V granted the Maltese islands as a fief to the

Hospitaller Order of St. John, the old isolation of Malta melted into thin air. The terms offered by the Holy Roman Emperor were so generous that with time the Order turned the island into a veritable sovereign state in all senses of the word. Various categories of foreigners, attracted by good work opportunities, settled in Malta, importing social, cultural and ideological components which were different from those originally predominating in the island.

It may be said that the Ottoman Siege of Malta of 1565 brought about a radical transformation to life in the island. For most people it marked the end of an old era and the beginning of wider horizons. This break with the past manifested itself at all levels. Immediately after the siege, increased migration to Sicily coupled with the continual evacuation of the countryside by a peasantry attracted to city life, led to extensive rural depopulation. The wide-spread destruction of houses, fields, livestock changed the villages physically. New buildings and churches in a different style were set up.

The new system created a dual social structure that develops immediately after the Knights Hospitallers set foot on Malta and becomes even more apparent after the siege of 1565 and the building of Valletta. This duality did not only exist at the social level, but it also pervaded the mental and cognitive structures of Maltese society. Two different cultural blocs, strictly separated from each other, formed two opposing camps, namely, Mdina and its suburb of Rabat as the seat of the countryside; Birgu (Vittoriosa after 1565) - and later Valletta - the seat of the urbanized harbour area.

On the one side there were the typical classes of an agrarian society, consisting of landowners, a small class of notaries, priests and clerks, and a mass of peasants. These had their own 'cultural traditions', to which they were strongly attached. On the other side, there were the new town dwellers and other settlers, often in the direct employment with the Order, who were 'alien', lived in the city, cosmopolitan in their orientation and with no 'ancient culture' of their own. Yet in the Harbour towns social distinctions prevailed, the fundamental difference based on economic affluence. The property owners and independent members of the town such as merchants, artisans, shopkeepers and professionals spurned those who were subservient or economically dependent by virtue of being labourers, apprentices and servants.

The Order came to represent a concentration of international capital, which coupled to an incredible reserve of human resource, made possible a vast programme of urbanization, successfully carried through, since the Order set foot on Malta in 1530. Even so, it is surprising to realize that it was possible to achieve all this on an island with a population-base of merely 30,000 (1590).

The creation of a new urban area around the Grand Harbour had effectively revolutionized the human geography of Malta and the life of its people. Nevertheless, after 1565 the emergence of Valletta - as the administrative capital of the Maltese islands - came to dominate and condition Maltese life. Urban theory recognizes cities to be, not merely dense concentrations of people, but above all, concentrations of people doing different things, where the urban character derives more from that variety of activity than it does from sheer numbers.

In reality, to speak of the Harbour area is to speak of a conglomeration of four towns: Valletta was the political and economic capital. In the upper part of the city, the Grand Master, the Grand Council and high society lived and exercised their authority. The common people lived mostly in the lower districts. The 'Three Cities' of Vittoriosa (known as Birgu before 1565), Senglea (or Isola) and Cospicua (previously known as Burmola) stood on the south bank of the Grand Harbour. Between them, the four towns had a population of around 10,000, that is, approximately one-third of Malta's population in 1590. The 'Three Cities' eventually came to form part of the popular district, together with lower Valletta with their narrow streets packed with foreigners, merchandize, sailors and slaves.

Valletta dominated the entire economy of Malta. The political influence of the Harbour towns on the countryside, the power of the Grand Master, the highly concentrated nature of trade, all combined and contributed to the vast development of the Harbour area. This growth imposed an order on the area it dominated, and established a wealth of administrative and trading connections. By the early seventeenth century, the Harbour zone had not only developed into a very busy area, but it practically handled all Malta's foreign trade, and had become a cultural centre of some value.

The Harbour towns were multifunctional and together they performed roles that were essential for the whole society. The creation of an efficient and

well-organized bureaucracy was to form the basis for the economic and political dependency of the countryside. Thus the more technically efficient the Harbour towns became, the more they increased the potential dependency of the countryside. The virtual monopoly of Valletta, over importation of all commodity items and exports including that of cotton (the major cash crop) enabled the new capital, from very early on, to control all the production and redistribution within the Maltese islands: it was, above all, the central sorting station. Whether bound inland or abroad, everything had to filter past through the Valletta harbour.

The Harbour town dwellers were well aware of the influence that the state had on their daily existence. The intensification of traffic and trade, the new technical possibilities of administration, and the economic development of the Harbour area, are part of the picture of the systematization of authority and the strengthening of the Grand Master's political role.

The Urban Culture of Malta

The heavy influx into the new urban areas of foreigners and people from the countryside, starting from the sixteenth century onwards, altered the ethnic character of the population of Malta. The newcomers may not have brought a distinctive culture of their own, as the case seems to be. Nevertheless, their physical preponderance managed to transform the distinctiveness of the Maltese lifestyle whose cultural patterns are usually associated with an urban life style. After all, what is essential here are not the internal contrasts of urban culture, but its different character from peasant approach.

It was common for the early modern middle classes to mingle with the ordinary folk because of the ever-growing demographic pressures. Thus, both wealthy Maltese and the Knights often occupied sumptuous buildings, while the workers lodged wherever space was available. The ground floor of these imposing edifices usually contained a stable, stores and a workshop with an entry from the street, sometimes with displays extending into the street itself.

Very often a number of families had to share the same dwelling in order to be able to pay the rent bill. Matrimonial contracts indirectly refer to the shortage of space within the Harbour towns. Thus, whereas it was normal for peasants to

own a normal house, maybe consisting of some rooms at ground floor level, it was common for poor artisans to live in one-room cellars, whose only means of light and air was the street door. The mezzanines, constructed above them, were likewise small and ill ventilated. Except for the houses of the rich, most tenements in the harbour area could pass as cheap housing. Such an atmosphere made family life difficult, and therefore most of the socialization processes took place not in the family, but at public levels.

Urban culture did not simply renew or transform earlier cultural practices, but organized them according to fundamentally new principles based on a 'market economy'. Obviously, city life, independent of class attachments, ethnic identity, and other traditional prejudices, were labelled as 'alien' by the indigenous population right from the very beginning of the Order's rule.

The immense surge of activities generated both by the foundation of Valletta and by the Order's presence – with its manifold interests – made the island one of the busiest centres of the Mediterranean. It served to create a cosmopolitan atmosphere that impressed itself on the character of Valletta and helped to enrich the country especially in the more creative activities. The Order of St. John had thus managed to establish a ruling system which seeped down the social scale and gave character to the Harbour area.

But these dominant cultural patterns failed to infiltrate the entire structure of peasant society. Philip Skippon, writing in 1664, could visibly distinguish city dwellers from villagers. He sums up the situation, by noting that while most city dwellers speak Italian well, the natives of the countryside speak a kind of Arabic. The Maltese historian Godfrey Wettinger tends to agree with Skippon's view. He argues that,

Gradually the townspeople became largely indistinguishable in outlook from the inhabitants of other towns in southern Europe... In the countryside, however, old forms of cooking, old musical instruments, much of the old types of houses... remained very much in use. There they still repeated the same old Maltese proverbs... worked the land in largely the same old way, hunted... and held homely festivities.

In practice, however, the Great Tradition certainly influenced village life that

went on to absorb and adopt elements of city life in a way to make it its own. The cosmopolitan character of Valletta helped enrich the island-state, especially in the more creative activities. The architectural boom spilled from the new city into the surrounding countryside and by the early seventeenth century, the parish churches of larger villages like Birkirkara, as well as, smaller ones like Balzan, Lija, and Attard, could boast of a parish church that was built on a magnificent scale. Probably the Cathedral Church at Mdina is the best example. Thus, one could say that urban culture possessed such a great integrating force that it quickly achieved hegemony. It was able to create a mode of behaviour and a way of life, largely, acceptable to the whole society.

The political centrality of the city underlined its cultural magnetism. Functioning as an administrative capital, Valletta broadcasted the fashions and values of the Grand Master's court. 'Ideas and styles, fashions, manners, and habits, artists, architects, and Belgian tapestries, were all imported from "trading Europe", and paid for by the Order's accumulating capital'. It attracted litigants to its Law Courts, and passed on the government's proclamations to the rest of the island.

In the economic field, the city became the harbinger of modernity with markets that 'were as much a meeting place for social intercourse as they were for business transactions'. Valletta, like any other early modern European capital, was the powerhouse of cultural change. The dissemination of artistic and cultural influence, information, and news reached the Maltese countryside. Together with the other towns of the Harbour area, it monopolized the economic and administrative resources of the new state.

Thus, a city which was originally conceived as a 'convent' and fortified enclave for the defence against possible Ottoman attack by a monastic military order, was transformed into a central Mediterranean hub of complex trading networks, intense commercial activity, and movement of people that resulted in the widest possible cultural diversity.