THE MALTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Researching, propagating and safeguarding
Malta’s historical heritage since 1950

Proceedings of History Week 2011

Edited by
Joan Abela - Emanuel Buttigieg - Krystle Farrugia
www.maltahistory.eu
Proceedings of History Week 2011
30th Anniversary Edition

History Week 2011 was dedicated to the memory of
Jean Quintin d’Autun (Quintinos) on the 450th anniversary of his death

Published in Malta by the
Malta Historical Society, and
Midsea Books Ltd.
6, Strait Street, Valletta, Malta
Tel: 2149 7046 Fax: 2149 6904
www.midseabooks.com

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First published, 2013

Cover design by Stephen C. Spiteri
Produced by Mizzi Design and Graphic Services Ltd.
Printed by Gutenberg Press Ltd.

ISBN 978-99932-7-439-1

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Editorial

Love or loath them, anniversaries tend to serve as useful focal points for reflection, generating all kinds of activities from publications to exhibitions. It was during a Committee meeting of the Malta Historical Society that Albert Ganado suggested that during History Week 2011 mention should be made of the fact that this coincided with the 450th year since the passing away of Jean Quintin d’Autun (often referred to simply as Quintinus), author of the renowned *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* (Lyons, 1536). The intention was to pay tribute to a man whose work — as the first published treatise on Malta — has been of significant influence in the centuries since its first appearance. Moreover, History Week and the published proceedings to which it bears fruit, follow in the footsteps of Quintinus in the sense that at its basis, History Week is about a quest for, and indeed a love of, knowledge and understanding in their widest possible forms.

By a happy coincidence, 2011 also marked the 30th anniversary from the *Proceedings of History Week 1981*, the first to be published. Prior to this, there were History Weeks in 1979 and 1980, but due to financial constraints, these could not be published. Fortunately, the Proceedings of 1981 saw the light of day under the editorship of Mario Buhagiar, thereby instituting a tradition which has continued over three decades to bring together women and men interested in Malta’s past with all its hues and complexities. In the Introduction (p.v) to the Proceedings of 1981, the then President of the Malta Historical Society, Mgr Vincent Borg stated:

The writing of history is alien to all flights of fancy and sectarian influences. Man’s achievements in time and space are brought to life through the historian’s dedication to the search of truth. In this work he has to enjoy full freedom from all forms of encroachment which, otherwise, would shackle the unbiased accounts that have to result from the historian’s work.

Such a vast and confident statement in the power of history to shine like a beacon of light amid darkness is fascinating in that its tone is particular and
universal at the same time. The unquestioning assumption that the male historian studies ‘man’s achievements’ in ‘search of truth’ reads somewhat anachronistically in a post-feminist and post-modernist age which has become aware that his-tory makes little sense without her-story and that ‘truth’ is in itself a highly unstable, problematic category of analysis. Nonetheless, the appeal for ‘freedom from all encroachment’ in the historian’s work remains as valid as ever and the Malta Historical Society, by providing a variety of fora and means for the dissemination and discussion of ideas, plays a seminal role in the continued fostering of such a freedom.

In Proceedings of History Week 1982, the editor, again Mario Buhagiar, set the tone for later volumes: the published Proceedings were ‘offered as a contribution towards the study of the history and culture of the Maltese islands’, while the meetings that constitute History Week itself, were – and still are – ‘rallying point[s] for Maltese scholars to come together and share the fruits of their research (p.v).’ A commitment to these salient points can be traced across the various volumes of Proceedings which have now appeared (listed below). Indeed, in her editorial preface to the Proceedings of 2009, Charlene Vella (incidentally the first female editor of this series) stated that: ‘The publication of the papers ensures that the important new material they contain becomes available to students, researchers and all those with a love and interest for Malta and its variegated historical and cultural heritage.’ The present editors, in presenting the current set of Proceedings, renew their and the Society’s commitment to the research, propagation and safeguarding of Malta’s historical heritage as a past which is pluralistic and belongs to all. The present volume, in line with its immediate predecessor, has adopted a more modern format that fits our digitally-enhanced era, while still putting forward a high quality of scholarship.

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History Week 2011 was held between 29 November – 2 December in the elegant setting of Palazzo de la Salle in Valletta, the historic seat of the Malta Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, to whom we are grateful for their co-operation and assistance in making this event a successful and enjoyable one. As ever, two features stand out in the Proceedings of History Week. First, their eclectic character, ranging across time and space and delving into all kinds of subjects from a multiplicity of methodological angles. Chronologically, the papers range from the early sixteenth century to the first half of the twentieth. Second, the proceedings offer a space for both established and emerging scholars to put forward the results of their labours. It is worth noting that a good number of the contributions in this volume trace their origins to dissertations submitted to the University of Malta. All too often, and regretfully, such works, which are full of original insights into themes and sources, end up largely forgotten in the vaults of the University Library. The Malta Historical Society is therefore providing a great service in bringing forth such studies and ensuring they are accessible to a much wider readership.

The present volume contains a strong contribution from the art historical and architectural side in the papers by Roger Vella Bonavita, David Mallia and Valentina Lupo. As the architectural gem which is Valletta looks to the future with a variety of projects that are intended to take it forward, Vella Bonavita’s paper draws us back to the genesis of the city, the details of which are still surprisingly open to discussion and debate. He provides an intimate insight into Francesco Laparelli, the man, the engineer and the arch-organiser / diplomat. We bear witness through this paper to the birth pangs of a Renaissance city and the character compatibilities and clashes of Laparelli and Grand Master Jean de Valette, all of which played a part in shaping Valletta, particularly in its earlier stages. With David Mallia, the reader is invited to cross over south, to the city of Tripoli in Libya, the scene of many dramatic events over the last couple of months. Tripoli’s connections to Malta go back over the centuries, including a short-lived (1530-1551) political union of sorts between these two outposts. Mallia’s paper focuses on the fortunes of the church of the Order in Tripoli, especially after the Hospitaller period came to an end. In highlighting the long-term evolution of this building, Mallia presents the formidable Turgut Reis (better known locally as Dragut) not so much as the feared corsair familiar to many Maltese, but as a skilful statesman and administrator within the complex world of Ottoman politics. Returning to Malta, Valentina Lupo’s paper takes us to the village of Had Dingli, where a little known artistic treasure, the polychrome wooden statue of St John the Baptist is preserved in the parish church. Lupo’s paper is technical in nature, but presented in an accessible and enjoyable form so that a non-specialist audience can understand the intricacies of a detailed and technical study of a work of art prior to the conservation and restoration process. It reminds us of the ‘life-cycle’ of objects, in this case a devotional statue, which despite being an inanimate object, ‘travelled’ extensively and experienced various changes in its life at the
In this sense, it opens up the way for further questioning of generally-accepted 'truths'.

The author here offers a very human story with protagonists ranging from corsairs to mothers, wives, and the sea itself. It is a work which revisits and questions the assumption of the decline of corsairing activities in the late eighteenth century; in this sense, it opens up the way for further questioning of generally-accepted 'truths'.

The nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries were, for Malta, the British period, a time of crown / fortress colony existence. Fascinating original insights into this phase are to be found in the papers by Michael Refalo and Dominic Fenech. Refalo’s paper is underscored by an engagement with Antonio’s Gramsci’s theory of the ‘integral state’ and the interaction between coercive and hegemonic exercises of power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two key protagonists here were the British colonial administration and the Roman Catholic Church, which Refalo describes as ‘the main institution of civil society’. The paper deals with both the big political questions, such as issues of taxation and expenditure, as well as with issues of material culture, such as the visibility of liturgical vestments. In a sense it is a ‘known story’ of the overlap and divergence of the interests of the colonial power and the colonised, but Refalo here enriches this story through an approach which is theoretically enhancing, offers new insights and goes beyond standard ‘nationalistic’ narratives. Many of these issues can be seen carried over into the early 1930s, the period with which Fenech is concerned here. The British colonial administration and the Roman Catholic Church were now joined by a ‘new’, significant and – as it turns out from an administrative point of view, both colonial and ecclesiastical – disruptive player, that is, the local political class, which by this time was firmly organised into formal political parties. Fenech offers a fascinating, detailed insight not only into a turbulent moment in local political history, but also into the wider fabric of imperial thoughts and European politics. He deftly weaves together a multiplicity of layers and players: the local situation, the regional-international-empire situation and the London environment consisting of competing ministers and civil servants, which all together, helped to give a variety of twists to the tale of Maltese self-government.

To conclude, it is fitting to end this editorial by acknowledging all those who played a role in ensuring the success of History Week 2011 and the publication of these Proceedings. First and foremost, we need to thank the main sponsor, Computime Business Systems Engineering, as well as the two other sponsors, Bank of Valletta and the Janatha Stubbs Trust. Their financial assistance is very much appreciated. Again, we need to thank the Malta Society of Arts and Manufactures for providing a congenial place where History Week could take place. We are also grateful to all those who generously offered their time to chair a session during History Week: Giovanni Bonello, George Cassar, Charles Farrugia, Sandra Debono and William Zammit. A word of appreciation must also go to all the contributors who were always friendly and diligent in heeding our instructions. We thank the Committee of the Malta Historical Society for their faith in entrusting us with the responsibility for History Week and the Proceedings and for the support which the same Committee gave us throughout. Finally, we thank our loved ones for patiently putting up with many hours of talk and work about History Week.
Contributors

PAUL CATANIA is a London University graduate with a specialization in social and economic history. For the last 30 years he has been researching the history of his home town, Naxxar. He has written four books and well over a hundred studies on the social life of the villagers. He is the archivist at the parish archives and is presently researching social life in the late sixteenth century in the three villages of the north.

ALEKS FARRUGIA studied philosophy and history at the University of Malta, graduating in Hospitaler Studies in 2011. He is the editor of the weekly newspaper Il-Torċa and lectures in philosophy. He is also a published author of a number of literary works in Maltese.

DOMINIC FENECH read history at the University of Malta and obtained his D.Phil in modern history from the University of Oxford, where he studied as a Rhodes scholar. He has been lecturing at the University of Malta since 1979. He is professor and Head of the History Department and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

LIAM GAUCI is the Curator of the Malta Maritime Museum. His current research focuses on the Maltese corsi between 1775-1798, with a special interest in the men that worked aboard the corsair ships and their impact on Maltese society. He obtained his MA from the Department of History of the University of Malta in 2012.

VALENTINA LUPO holds a Bachelor Degree in Conservation and Restoration of paintings and polychrome sculptures. She has presented her dissertation 'A study of the polychrome wooden sculpture of St John the Baptist located at Dingli parish church' as a poster at the twenty-fourth biennial IIC (International Institute for Conservation) Congress in Vienna. In 2012 she teamed up with a group of conservators and opened 'Atelier del Restauro', a private conservation and restoration laboratory. She is also the P.R.O of MAPCo-Re (Malta Association of Professional Conservators-Restorers).

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MICHAEL REFALO obtained a doctorate of laws in 1980 and after nearly 30 years legal practice, read for a BA at the Gozo Centre of the University of Malta, followed by a Ph.D. His dissertation was entitled The Maltese Commercial Class, 1870-1914.
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ADRIAN SCERRI graduated in theology in 1997 and obtained his masters in the same 2006, linking the passion of Greek tragedy with the depth of the Gospel of John. In 2011 he obtained an MA in Hospitaller Studies. Taking the Order's diplomacy as his area of specialization, he concentrated on the career of Frâ Marcello Sacchetti, ambassador for the Order at the Holy See during the magistracy of Frâ Gregorio Carafa.

CARMEL VASSALLO has researched and published extensively on a variety of aspects concerning Malta's maritime history. He is Co-ordinator of the Mediterranean Maritime History Network and Head of the Department of Spanish at the University of Malta.

ROGER VELLA BONAVITA was educated at St Edward's College and Manchester University. From 1965 he lectured in history at the University of Malta where he strove to make the curriculum relevant to independent Malta. He moved to Perth, Western Australia in 1982 and worked there as an executive in the private, public and higher education sectors. Retiring in 1998, he returned to researching Maltese history, especially its fortifications. In 2011 he received his doctorate from the University for his thesis on the career of Francesco Laparelli da Cortona, the designer of Valletta.

Editors

JOAN ABELA read History at the University of Malta as a mature student, obtaining her B.A. (Hons) degree in 2003 and an M.A. with Distinction in 2007. In 2008 she was awarded a Malta Government Scholarship to pursue her studies abroad and concurrently another Scholarship from the Centre for Maritime Historical Studies at the University of Exeter. There, under the supervision of Dr. Maria Fusaro, she read for a PhD. Her research interests focus mainly on sixteenth-century Malta, with particular reference to port activities and notarial primary sources. She is a founding member of the Notarial Archives Resources Council, Secretary of the Malta Historical Society, board member of the Planning Authority’s Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee and visiting assistant lecturer at the Department of Legal History and Methodology, University of Malta.

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KRYSTLE FARRUGIA is a recent MA graduate in Art History at the University of Malta. For her dissertation she specialised in the study of art history and artistic preferences in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, focusing on the erudite figure of Count Saverio Marchese. She is currently Research Officer for the Research Programme ‘The Study of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands’ in the History of Art Department at the University of Malta.