ON THE CUSTOMS OF THE MALTESE, THEIR CONDITIONS,
THEIR MORAL CHARACTER, AND THEIR PECULIARITIES

The Maltese who want to show off their wealth dress in the same way as
Europeans, except that their women wear a wrap of black silk, and, instead
of a hat, a covering of the same material over their heads. There is nothing
of a hat, a covering of the same material over their heads. Some Maltese
uglier than the sight of these black clothes in the summer. Some Maltese
women imitate Englishwomen in their dress, but when they go to church they
wear their traditional costume, the notion being that black is more seemly
in church and more consonant with assiduity in prayer; even so do ignorant
Christian women fancy that it does not hurt him who wears trousers over his
clothes to approach the altar of the Church.

Among villagers, the men have their ears pierced and wear gold ear-rings;
they also let lengths of twisted hair dangle from the temples to the base of
the neck. These are feminine characteristics. They also wear caps of various
colours which hang down on their shoulders; these [caps] look like stockings.
They walk barefoot and are belted. Some of them wear several gold rings,
and have the buttons of their waistcoats made of the same metal or of silver.
They then place their coasts on their shoulders, and, barefoot, walk in merrym
and sprightly fashion. On feast-days, a porter or publican of the like will
appear with ten gold rings on his fingers, as many on his watch-chain, and
numerous gold or silver buttons on his waistcoat.

As for [village] women, such as own a pair of shoes wear it only in the
city, and do so proudly. Once out of the city, they carry them under the arm.

The notables of Malta all depart from the custom of the Franks in Europe
in that they go out in summer without cloaks to hide their posteriorities. The
most decently pretentious among them have their trousers made so tight
over their thighs and buttocks that they can no longer [stool to] pick any-
thing off the ground, and when they climb stairs or the like they tread warily
make sure that they do not split at the back. Most of them enlarge those thighs
and posteriorities by stuffing their trousers, pad every bone that protrudes
in their body, and display what ought to be concealed; then when walking
they keep peering at their shoulders so that they look like the dwarf who
waddles as he goes about, and they cast glances at their trousers and shoes
full of admiration for their own finery.

The vanity and pride of the women as they walk is [even] greater than the
vanity of the men. You will see them stepping out like brides being taken
in procession to their grooms, holding the edge of the wrap in the left hand
and the edge of the head-covering in the right; they are then more encumbered
than one who has two churning vessels [to work at the same time].

1. To this day, Arabs who adopt European dress show a marked preference for long
jackets.

When they return home, however, they put on the most ragged clothes
they have. Rich and poor, men and women are alike in this. This is one of
the reasons why the Maltese favour restraint and modesty. A woman
who wears good clothes at home is often considered a show-off. If you should
call on a Maltese, he will not be ashamed to say, "Wait a little; my wife is
changing in order to come and meet you."

Among these women there are some who stay barefoot at home, yet when
they go out on Sunday they wear silk stockings and silk gloves and adorn
themselves as gaudily as they can, for—contrary to the English who, here,
avoid always maintain the same appearance—the Maltese deck themselves at least
times as splendidly as possible.

On the whole, the entire concern of these people is to show off their
finery. This is characteristic of the newly rich.

When a Maltese woman is pregnant, she struts and thrusts up her abdomen
that all the passers-by may notice her. When she sees some one afflicted
with an infirmity, she makes the sign of the cross over her abdomen to prevent
the infirmity from communicating itself to the unborn child. And if, while
on her way, she smears some food being cooked and experiences a craving for
it, she will send someone to solicit the gift of a portion of it.

Women's ornaments are usually of gold among the wealthy or of silver
among the poor, but seldom does one see a woman without some gold
ornament. The various kinds of ornaments are: ear-rings (which they call
misulet and which in the Maghreb are called Masul); bracelets which they
wear over their sleeves; brooches, rings, chains, and watches. Very seldom
do they deck themselves with precious stones: only noble ladies wear them,
at dances or banquets; sometimes they make do with the ones.

On the whole, neither Maltese nor Frankish women have so much jewelry
as Egyptian or Syrian women. Their admiration is restricted to how clean
and fashionable their clothes are, but whereas the clothing of Frankish men
is not without offence to modesty, that of their women is more conducive to
self-restraint and charity than that of our women. On the other hand, their
practice of changing clothes is profitable to traders but harmful to the public
for it results in unnecessary recurrent expenses. These changes start in Paris;
then representations [of the new fashions] are printed on sheets of paper and
sent to all countries. Such is the way of humans: when they repudiate one
view, it is only to turn to another. So it is when the Franks turned away
from embrodered and broadened clothing, desiring them the appanage of
young boys, they acquired a fondness for changes of form.

For all that, because the clothing of the Franks is in winter never any-
thing but black (whether it be of broadcloth or other material), and in sum-
mer never anything but white, their fairs and feasts have no gaiety. There
is nothing there to please the eye except the clothing of soldiers and of some
women. There is no doubt that the love of bright colours is natural, for we
find it in children; but they say that a taste for them is characteristic of
2. The belief that the unsatisfied craving of an expectant mother marks the child is
widespread among Arabs.
he has in his hand saying, "Ekk [sic] joghjibok." That is to say [in Arabic] that it is impossible for you to go near him.

It is of course not unknown that the bread of the Franks is large and tough, and that they cut it with a knife. The reason for this is economy. For if a meal someone should cut a piece of loaf and leave a piece, it is not considered shameful to keep the remainder, and the remaining portion may be brought to the table several times. This is different from the Oriental custom according to which a loaf, having had a piece cut off it, may not be brought back to the table incomplete, for the action would be considered vile and mean.

At the same time, the fact that the loaf is big means that the inside is not [properly] baked. In Maltese bread, in fact, the crumb—which is the greater part of the loaf—is almost wringing wet and cannot be eaten until it is a day old. It is also the worse bread to be found in Frankish countries, for apart from the fact that it is kneaded with the feet, it is sour and indigestible. On the other hand it contains, I think, fewer chemicals than English bread.

The Maltese do have a kind of bread which is round like ours and which they call fatayir [pl. of fatiroh, a panake; Maltese fasjar]. They eat it as a delicacy. I have enquired why it is scarce and is not sold in all shops, and have been told that [if more generally available] it would result in increased expenditure because it is so good. When hungry, the Maltese eat of it only enough to still their hunger.

The majority of the Maltese cook blood and eat it with avirdity. Whenever we wanted a chicken killed, the man who killed it used to take away its blood and thank us for it. They and all Franks also eat turtles and other animals which disgust us. I have even heard that some Maltese, if startled by something distressing, will eat a mouse or a frog to counter the shock.

At all events, the nearest Maltese peasant is familiar with dishes unknown to the great merchants in England, for they cook meat dishes which combine all kinds of vegetables.

On the whole, Franks are unhygienic in their cooking [in the first place], because their maids always have their head uncovered so that their hair tangles in what is being cooked, and [in the second place] because they serve dishes under which has been eaten by beasts of prey, unless it is made clean by giving the stone, forbidden you.

4. Precisely the same is true among Arabs. Even boatmen sailing in mid-stream are invited to such special invitations to other boatmen—by persons on shore, courtesies offered in this spirit are usually called "boatmen's invitations."

5. Cf. Lane, Modern Egyptians, London, 1846, v. I. p. 183: "The bread is always made in the form of a round flat cake, generally about a span in width, and a cake of a round flat cake, generally a span in width, and a cake of a round flat cake, generally a span in width, and a cake of a round..."

6. Cf. Qur'Un, V. 4: "That which dieth of itself, and blood, and cow's flesh, and all finger's bread in thickness..."
is almost a forgotten one in Malta. Most of the utensils used by the English, however, are made of iron, so that the consequences are not so harmful. The Maltese are like other Franks in that they eat animals which have like animals which have died a natural death...  

A man invariably sleeps with his wife, even if they are long-married and have grown decrepit and languid together. As for the rabble and riff-raff, you will see them midday lying face downward by the roadside; there is in this connection a tradition [of the Prophet Muhammad] which says: "Devils lie prone in their sleep." If you visit a wealthy Maltese, he is quick to show you what furnishings and hangings he has, and the first thing that he will show you is his bed. The Maltese are not in the habit of providing beds for visitors as we do in our country.

Among the refinements and creature comforts of which the Maltese are deprived is reclining on soft sofas and pillows, for they sit only on chairs. They do have wooden couches, but these have no upholstery or stuffing. Just imagine how a man may sit for the whole day on a chair outside his house.

7. It is, of course, absolutely necessary, to prevent poisoning by vermin, that copper utensils — which used to be the commonest in the Near East — be lined with tin, and that this lining be renewed periodically. The tinner's trade is still common in Arab countries.

8. See n. 6 above.

9. Cf. Clot Bey, Op. Cit., v. I, pp. 323-4: "In general, they [i.e. Turks and Arabs] are not accustomed to beds. Over the past few years, it is true, some beds have been introduced, but they remain far from common. Egyptians spread one mattress or more over their rug, and sleep on them clothed. They claim that such a couch, made up anew every evening on the floor of their habitation, is more comfortable in that it is level throughout; they also say that it is less cumbersome than our beds. They have no special rooms to sleep in, and the rolled-up mattresses are usually kept in the room in which one has rested during the night to whatever use it is required for during the day.

10. Oriental mattresses are stuffed with cotton. They are thin, for the Egyptians would rather multiply their number than increase their volume. The dimensions in which they make them are suitable to their purposes, in the first place because they make them easy to fold and move, in the second place because in a hot country a couch made up of thick mattresses would allow less refreshing air circulation and would increase the concentration of heat." Cf. also Lane, v. I, p. 323-4.

11. A tradition to this effect, but not in the words used by Shidyaq, is found in most authoritative collections — e.g. that of Musil, Chapter on TAHARAH (Purification) No. 29.

12. Cf. Clot Bey, I, p. 203: "In her relationship with her husband the woman displays a courtesy which the English habitually find in the more traditional and more conservative. She indicates none of the familiar easy-going manners which, in the most conservative quarters, are an index of the prevailing equality of the sexes. Often, she remains standing in her husband's presence, always she calls him her master..."
behind it and soldiers accompany it; then, when he has been buried, the rifles are fired all together as an indication that he died in the fullness of his power and authority.

Physically, the Maltese are mostly of dark complexion and medium stature; they have black hair and eyes, thick eye-brows, and powerful frames. In general, the men are more handsome than the women. Many of the women here have hair on the upper lip or on the cheeks or between the lower lip and the chin, and some of them shave it. Yet among the Franks there are those who prize this feature of theirs. Their vanity and pride in the clothes and ornaments with which they adorn themselves I have already condemned.

As for their manners, their notions are mostly mild and affable, when you enquire of one of them about anything he will answer you cheerfully and amiably. All of them are characterised by hard work, careful management, and thrift. Thus they will not reduce themselves to straits in order to keep up ancient and harmful customs. None of them will burden himself with a multitude of servants in order to exalt his position and prestige, neither will they incur excessive expenses on the occasion of some celebration or wedding. The wives of the rich do not wear necklaces of diamonds or the like. No. malcontents visiting their friends without a large attendance. Rich men go to the shops in the morning to buy the day’s provisions. A noblewoman may go visiting a friend without either of them being distracted from work, for she will take something with her to work on. She is who will run her household for she does not delegate its concerns to a maid-servant. Those deemed greatest among them have a maidservant and a maidservant as well. More than once have I seen the chief doctor of the hospital putting up ropes on the roof of his house then hanging out the washing piece by piece. Once the washing is dry they take down the ropes and put them in a protected place. I have also seen some Consuls putting up their flags from their own hands. The poor among them abstain from lighting a lamp on moonlight nights.

Most of the men hand their earnings over to their wives, so that they have to ask them for money for tobacco or the like; but then all their women are thrifty and hard-working, although few trade or keep shops.

Each and all are characterised by inquisitiveness and concern with trivialities of speech and action. Thus if anyone stoops to pick something off the ground a crowd gathers round him, and people keep running in from this direction or that until the street is blocked. When something happens, everyone keeps talking about it for days, until something else happens (to divert their interest). And of any occurrence, you will get to hear the origin, the beginning and the end from all who come or go. Before he goes to bed, every one of the low-born must relate everything that has happened to him during the day to the courtiers or the courts or the courtiers or the courtiers.

Among the Maltese, when a small child dies, friends come to the father to wish him joy saying, “We congratulate you on [your share of] Paradise.” And when a child is born, they place straw under it that its first bed might be of it, as was the Messiah’s.

When an officer dies, his bier is carried in procession, music is played

18. It has been one of the tasks of Arab modernists to combat extravagant displays on the occasion of births, marriages, deaths, etc.
across a man to tell him, “We have seen your wife looking out of the window, accost a man to tell him, “We have seen your wife looking out of the window, 
and that she looks much pleased with the man.” They say
and that she looks much pleased with the man.” They say
or to someone they do not know, and that she looks much pleased with the man. They say
or to someone they do not know, and that she looks much pleased with the man. They say

As for their eagerness to earn money, it is such that it leaves no value
to anything else. Some travel to distant lands and expose themselves to
humiliation and contempt until, having acquired money, they return to their
homeland proud and boastful of their riches, despising themselves in the
marketplaces with the demeanour of those in whom well-being has nurtured
conceit, and good fortune insolence.

Nothing in the whole world is as pleasing in their eyes as their own
country. You always hear them boasting of it and of its conditions, and if
you approach any one of them with an inquiry about it, he will speak to you
with a plausible tongue of the happiness and prosperity that were its lot, and
of all the ill fortune to which it has been reduced. They love it as the Jews
love Zion.

Strange to say, in spite of all this boasting if you name to a Maltese
individual a country that you will never find him pleased with any of

18. Cf. Lane, I, p. 80: “In general, they (i.e. Egyptians) have a great dread of
quarreling with a man, and I have heard of several determining to visit a
foreign country, for the sake of considerable advantages: in prospect, but when the
time of their intended departure drew near, their resolution failed them. Severe opprobrium
has lately lessened this feeling; which is doubtless owing, in a great degree, to
ignorance of foreign lands and their inhabitants.”
St. Paul was once thus baptized, and its godparents were the Governor and his wife, for he was a Catholic.

The Maltese say that the invocation of a bell is always answered, so as soon as there is thunder and lightning they hasten to strike [the bells].

They also baptize babies the very day they are born, even in the coldest weather: and this must take place in a church, not at home.

To look upon the Eucharist while it is being carried in procession without kneeling before it is to expose oneself to danger. Thus it is said that the Maltese once killed an English sailor who passed by [such a procession] and did not kneel; they so belaboured him with blows and stabs that he was carried away dead.

The Maltese hold that the shape of the Cross is to be found in every man's body, this being so when he extends his arms and holds up his head; also that the name of the Virgin Mary is traced in every hand, in that the main lines of the palm resemble the letter M in the Latin alphabet. Similar to this is something that I have come across in an Arabic book: that the name of the Prophet (God bless and preserve him) [i.e. Muhammad] is written in everyone's body, for the [first] mim resembles the head, the ba resembles the breast, the [second] mim resembles the navel, and the dal resembles the leg.

During Lent and on Wednesdays and Saturdays, milk vendors do not openly name what they are selling but say: “Habib in Libna” [Here is what pertains to white] — the word “habib” [possessor, associate]. On other days, they call out “halib” [milk].

For all this rigour of theirs in religious matters, they go on buying and selling on Sundays and feast-days as on any other day; those who would appear to be pious keep their shops open until noon only.

I have seen many Italian cities, but in none of them have I seen as many street statues as there are in Valletta. In former times, these statues were a refuge to which criminals resorted; thus a murderer escaped and stationed himself beneath one of these statues, he was safe from the vengeance of the law. This custom has now been discontinued.

It must be mentioned here that the Maltese refuse to apply the term Naara [in Maltese, Catholic; in Arabic, Christian] to the English and that an Englishman is married to a Maltese woman by English [i.e. Anglican] parson, his marriage is void in law.