Studi sull’Oriente Cristiano

The Jewesses of Malta: Slaves and Peddlers, Healers and Diviners

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THE JEWESSES OF MALTA:
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HEALERS AND DIVINERS

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The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have probably witnessed some of the most horrendous episodes of scape-goating in European history. Individuals who did not conform – particularly ‘witches’, ‘heretics’, and members of the Jewish communities scattered all over Europe – were often perceived as the ‘other’. Similarly in the Mediterranean island of Malta, anyone who fitted one of these typologies exposed oneself to potential abuse.

But there was a striking contrast between witches and heretics on the one hand and Muslims, and Jews on the other. Witches and heretics were essentially seen, in the case of Malta, as insiders who broke the code of ethics. Muslims and Jews were regarded with mistrust by the Maltese authorities and the Christian community. The Jews, in particular, had a long record of being faithless and it was customary to portray them as treacherous enemies of the Christian society. The term *perfidia* which was used in connection with Jews by Catholics – a term which was inherited from Church conciliar decrees and papal bulls since the thirteenth century suggested not only a rejection of the Christian faith but even a determination to undermine and corrupt it. Even when a Jew (or Muslim) converted to Christianity he or she continued to carry the old stigma attached to his, or her, old religion and was thus prone to accusations of heretical behaviour, and particularly, the practice of magic.

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In essence therefore the image of the Jew, throughout Europe including Malta, was a very negative one starting at least from the late Middle Ages and reaching its peak in the seventeenth century. It was a generally widespread phenomenon in Catholic and Protestant territories with the result that it spread throughout most of Europe, from Portugal to Hungary, and from Scotland to Malta. The English playwright and satirist John Marston (1576-1634) highlights the general belief in the deviousness of the Jews in his play ‘The Malcontent’ (1604). This idea was so widespread that sixteenth century Christians believed that Jews would do their utmost to poison the minds of Christians. Thus when a character in ‘The Malcontent’ is asked: ‘Canst thou impoison?’ he readily replies. ‘Excellently, no Jew, apothecary or politician better’3. Similarly in ‘The Jew of Malta’ (1589) Christopher Marlowe transforms the Jewish merchant Barabas into a superhuman villain and draws attention of with to the Jew’s barbarous revenge against the authorities of Malta. The Jew is seen as one who disrupts the well-being of Maltese society, a theme which seems to have influenced William Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice.

The authorities were particularly wary of Jews rubbing shoulders with the locals. This was because they represented a serious social internal threat as they were in contact with the mass of the urban population where they might influence popular beliefs, a concern which the Inquisition, and the civil authorities, took very seriously. It explains why, in cities where there existed large communities of Jews, it was felt necessary to create specific areas, or ghettos, were they could be monitored. Malta did not have such a ghetto as until the eighteenth century the Jews of Malta were mostly slaves captured by the Knights of Malta in their corsairing raids. They were mainly kept at the bagno of Vittoriosa, as the Slaves prison was called, where they were permitted to hold religious services and Jewish festivals.

In the period under study 1530-1798 the tiny archipelago of Malta was de jure under Spain, as part of the Kingdom of Sicily, but de facto under the rule of the crusading Hospitaller Order of St John. Malta then served primarily as a frontier between Christianity and Islam. Jews, often thought to be sympathetic to the Ottoman cause, were normally labelled as potential traitors of the Catholic faith, and indeed of Western Christianity. As a result, it would have been hard for Jews to settle in a crusaders’ haven like Malta. The Jews that reached Malta in the 16th and 17th centuries were therefore either travellers or rootless men and women. They were not born in Malta and ranged in status from the ‘international merchant’ to the slave. They brought with them the cultural val-

ues of the area from where they originally hailed. These included the Marranos, immigrants from the Iberian peninsula of Jewish blood who lived, at least outwardly, as Catholics. Then there were Jews from Italy and the Levant, some of whom had turned Christian and then apostasised, and others, who remained firmly entrenched in their Jewish beliefs. Throughout the period under study the Jewish community was indeed very small. At times the ‘community’ only comprised a few individuals. However, the examples provided for Malta, based largely on the Malta Inquisition records, provide direct insights into the way Jews survived, were generally perceived, and treated, by the dominating Catholic society of Malta.

**Peddlers**

As has been pointed out the Jews who roamed the streets of Malta in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were essentially slaves. These slaves normally became peddlers and sold their wares in the streets of the Borgo – or Vittoriosa as it became known after the Ottoman Siege of 1565 – and later in Valletta. But both the Church and the State looked on these peddlers as law breakers.

In 1537 – a mere seven years after the Order of St John set foot on Malta – Grand Master Juan de Homedes stipulated that infidel slaves – Jews and Muslims alike – were forbidden to sell any cloth, leather goods, ironware, vegetables and fruit under the penalty of twenty-five lashings. At the same time the inhabitants of Malta were strictly forbidden to buy anything from slaves under a fine of twelve tari and the confiscation of the goods. Two years later the rule was extended to include all ‘Infidels’, even if these had been freed, and the penalty was doubled to fifty lashings. The penalty was reduced by 1555. And yet a proclamation of 1574 reveals that most of the meat and poultry sold in Malta passed by way of retail through the hands of Muslim and Jewish slaves. Almost twenty

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5 Henceforth slaves who sold meat were to be confiscated from their owners if in private ownership, or executed, if they belonged to the Order. On their part Christian men who traded with slaves were to be sent to row on the galleys and women publicly whipped or any other punishment deemed fitting the Grand Master. *Informata sua Illustissima et Reverendissima Signoria che gran parte della carne così minuta come grossa, gallini, Pollami et ova, per questa sua Isola et Casali, si compra da schiavi Infedeli, et hebrei, li quali exinde di vendere non senza grande pregiudicio de la Universita, et suoi subditi... desiderosa sua Illustissima et Reverendissima Signoria
years later Grand Master Verdalle once again issued similar laws prohibiting the sale of bread and other consumables by slaves.

Yet one wonders whether these laws were ever really effective. Indeed all these attempts to adjust punishments may indicate that the penalties were not enforced properly. Less than six years after the publication of Verdalle's proclamation, the Muslim slave Hali Maurus declared that, like other Muslim peddlers, he left sacks of fruit and vegetables at the home of a Moorish woman called Fechra in Valletta. The Muslim would then sell his wares little by little in the streets of Valletta. Such open transgression of the laws may, in 1640, have induced Grand Master Lascaris once again to issue decrees that prohibited slaves from carrying out such transactions.

Despite all these efforts, the effect of these rules must have been minimal. In 1644, a mere four years after the publication of the Lascaris decrees, Maria Gilibert declared that she had been encouraged to consult a young Jewess, slave of a knight Commander and peddler.

Healers

Very often peddlers often meddled in healing practices and divination and were seen, by the authorities, as a bad influence on the local Christian population because the Maltese people believed that infidel slaves possessed magical powers.

Jews were also believed to have special powers and thus their magic was believed to be very effective. Thus, by way of example, in 1638 the Magnifico

remediare... ordina e comanda che nessuna persona... ardisca, tanto di questa sua città Valletta come della Vittoriosa, et suoi luoci subiacenti come ancora tutti li habitanti nelle casali di questa sua Isola vendere nulla specie di carme, ne specie di pullame ne ove a schiavi Infedeli...'. NLM Libr. ms. 149, pp.168-169: 1 April, 1574; WETTINGER, Slavery, 418.

6 '...per evitare molti furto, et latrocini inconvenienti et eccessi, che si commettano per causa di lasciar che l'infedeli vendano, maxime in publica piazza pane, et altre sorte di cose di mangiare, et bere, et ancho uittovaglie. Et acciocché per tal larghezza, et occasione non abbiano commercio continuo con giovani, ne vendano, ricettino, ne occultino molte cose rubbate da diversi ordiniamo, che nium Infedele presuma, ne ardisca far tale officio ne vendere, o alienare qualsivoglia sorta di robba che fusse, ne alle piaze publiche, ne in qualsivoglia altro loco publico sotto pena per la prima volta d'aver irremisibilmente cinquanta colpi di nervo in publico, Et esserli confiscate le robbe vendibili, che si troveranno in loro potere, per la seconda volta di essere frustato, e per la terza di vugar tre anni in galera senza stipendio alcuno...'. NLM Libr. ms. 704, fol. 101-v.; WETTINGER, Slavery, 419.

7 AIM [Cathedral Archives Malta, Archives of the Inquisition of Malta],Crim., [Criminal proceedings], vol.16A, case 42, fols.405v-406: 21 January, 1599.

8 NLM Libr. ms. 158, fol. 53.

9 The arcipelago is an area in lower Valletta facing the Grand Harbour where the slaves' prison and the Holy Infirmary – the Order's hospital - were set up.
Emilio Anastasio of Gozo found out that his black female slave and his younger brother Pietro, had asked a neophyte Jew, named Paulo, (who sold nougat in the streets of Gozo) to prepare a philtre, which could kill the Magnifico Emilio and thus enable Pietro to inherit his elder brother!\textsuperscript{10}

In 1665 a young widow living in Valletta, resorted to several remedies in order to reconcile herself with her lover. Amongst the spells, she tried one that was suggested to her by a Jewish street peddler\textsuperscript{11}.

The earliest reference to witchcraft practices by Jews, that I came across, date back to 1594. Several witnesses appeared before the Inquisition Tribunal accusing Jona of Rhodes of being a magara (witch). Jona was first denounced by the freed Jewish slave Caym son of Habram who explained that he had been witness to a heated argument between Jona and two male Jews - Gioseph Sormani and Juda Riczo. According to Caym, the two men had accused Jona of having practised witchcraft several times. She had offered her services to several Christian women be they the ‘Baroness’ or ‘city’, Harbour area women\textsuperscript{12}.

In his deposition Caym specified that the quarrel between Jona, on the one hand, and Sormani and Riczo on the other, took place during Holy Week. The timing chosen could not have been worse and it may suggest that Caym was keen to deal a severe blow on the character of Jona. This may have been because Jona had informed the slave Jewish community that Caym intended to convert to Christianity.

\textsuperscript{10} AIM Crim., vol.56B, case 416, fol.953v.: 26 April, 1638.

\textsuperscript{11} The young widow, Maddalena Bartolomea Rossolet aged 20 claimed: ‘...I asked a Jew who sold goods, a man aged about 40, tall and dark, and sold goods in the streets, if he knew how to prepare some remedy which would make my carnal friend reconcile with me, and he told me to pick some stones from the road outside the city walls which I had to boil in vinegar and in that way my friend... would reconcile with me...' AIM Crim., vol.72B, case 123, fol. 581-v: 8 November, 1665.

\textsuperscript{12} Apart from the 'Baroness'- presumably the Baroness Inguanes -- at the citta vechia (Mdina), the women included: Sevasti at the citta nova (Valletta); the Signora Costanza; a woman called Angelina; the lover of the gentilhomo (gentleman); and a Vittoriosa woman called San­­ta. This accusation was made at the gate of the slaves' prison and many Christians were present including the Capo Mastro of the Capitana galley Mastro Angelo Grugno. Months later Jona quarrelled again with Sormani in the presence of Caym and another Jew, Izac ben barbur. Caym intended to convert to Christianity but the Grand Master turned down his petition. Caym explained that Jona was the reason for his two-month imprisonment, that she had told the other Jews about his failed application and that the other Jews were seeking ways how to send him to row on the galleys. Caym even declared that he had heard Helionora, the widow of Joanne Brix, say that a Sicilian man had fallen in love with her and wanted to marry her but had to wait until his ailing wife died. On hearing this Jona asked Helionora for a piece of the sick woman's dress and some silk thread in order to make the wife die in less than two months but Helionora would not collaborate. AIM Crim., vol.13, case 65, fol.252-253: 26 September, 1594.
Another witness, Solomon of Candia (Crete), likewise reported Jona of allegedly performing several spells and confirmed that she had been labelled magara. Similarly Gioseph Sormani claimed that he often quarrelled with Jona and on such occasions he usually called her by names like ruffiana (pimp), puttana (whore) and particularly magara (witch). This, as Sormani explained, was not extraordinary and was everyday life banter in the Levant from where they both hailed. Hence according to Sormani it was customary for people in the lands of the Ottoman Empire to lash out at each other by calling each other names!

When brought to witness Juda Riczo presented a rather different view and claimed that he had known Jona for seven years. While Riczo admitted that Jona prepared healing medicaments he added that she acted like a respectable woman. This claim appears to have convinced the Inquisition judiciary that denunciations against Jona by fellow Jews were the result of prejudice and personal enmity and Jona the healer was not prosecuted.

On a popular level Jews and Muslims seem to have been attributed with special powers making them much sought after for supernatural intervention like the search for hidden treasure; the infliction or removal of the power of sorcery; the preparation of love-magic potions or get-rich-quick schemes; and spells to ward off the evil-eye.

The common folk did not really distinguish between Jews and Muslims and sought the advice or intervention of healers from both creeds, and of both sexes, to achieve their aims. This can be confirmed in the case-study of a woman called Barbara Vella. In 1632 Barbara was preoccupied for her sick eighteen month-old infant who suffered from spleen disease. She first consulted 'an Arab' whose advice did not help to improve the child’s condition. Then she consulted Rosa, a Jewess from Valletta, who suggested to her to prepare an ointment consisting of virgin wax, an old white onion, oil, and rue. Rosa further advised Barbara to visit her at her house either before sunrise, or after sunset. Barbara did so for three days and on each occasion Rosa would smear the ointment round the infant’s waist while in the meantime whispering some words. Rosa diagnosed the disease as an infants’ disease which descended from the head. She explained that the term used by Jews was cefalo. Rosa received

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13 "Io la chiamavo particolarmente magara perché noi altri in levante sogliamo gettarla in facchia alle donne... queste parole per inturrali..." AIM Crim., vol.13, case 65, fols.254-255: 7 October, 1594.

14 In his deposition Riczo explained: 'I know the Jewess Jona as a married woman from Rhodes whose occupation is that of preparing preserves and medical concoctions and she has a good reputation and it is now seven years that we have been slaves together..." AIM Crim., vol.13, case 65, fol. 253v: 7 October, 1594.
two tari for her pains but the infant did not recover and she was never consulted again.\footnote{...me disse che questo male discendeva dal capo di detto figliolino, il qual male e chiamato da essi hebrei cefalo, e gli diedi doi tari, e non ci tornai piu. Cefalo could possibly derive from the Greek kefa\-li meaning head. AIM Crim., vol.49B, case 99, fol.510: 5 April, 1632. The following day Barbara returned to the Holy Office to add more details on her encounters with ‘the Arab’ and the Jewess Rosa whom, she said, had asked her for a doe’s (?) skin. She even thought that Rosa had nominated the devil. Ibid., fol. 510R: 6 April, 1632.}

It was not only women hailing from the Harbour towns that believed in the powers of Jews and Muslims. One even comes across villagers, men and women alike, who took great pains to consult Jewish healers probably due to the general belief that Jews, like Muslims, had special powers because of their ability to write and this in a script and language which were completely unknown, and therefore mysterious, to them.

In 1634 a man from the village of Siggiewi, Mario Xerri, found some hairs on a cushion on which he was lying. He suspected that someone had cast a spell on him. In a genuine attempt to ward off the evil eye, his wife Marietta promptly consulted first the Muslim slave Haj Abdulla, and later an unnamed Jew. The Jew advised Marietta to burn the hairs in the street together with a spoonful of a concoction he had given her. The woman followed the Jew’s instructions but she was soon reported to the Inquisition by no other than the husband himself.\footnote{AIM Crim., vol. 50B, case 272, fol.720: 14 April, 1634.}

Ten years later another peasant, Paulo Gelestri, had recourse to another young unnamed Jew to heal his ailing brother-in-law. Gelestri even managed to convince the Jew to travel all the way from Valletta to Mosta with him. The Jew not only followed Gelestri to Mosta but he even returned to check on the sick man the following day. The unnamed Jew appears to have been very dedicated to his healing activities and was not much different from any other conscientious physician. The formal healing methods were similar to the medicaments prepared by other popular healers at the time. Thus we find the healer writing something on a piece of paper which was then mixed with rose water and given to the sick man to drink. Alternatively the paper was burnt and used to fumigate the place where the sick man was. Gelestri and his family members appreciated the efforts of the Jew and only denounced him after being ordered to do so by Gelestri’s confessor.\footnote{Gelestri admitted ‘...the said Jew, told me that he wanted to heal him with the help of God.’ AIM Crim., vol. 58A, case 622, fol.336-v: 24 December, 1644.} Once again the Holy Office did not proceed with the accusation, possibly because of the good faith shown by both the family and the Jew.
Love Magic and Divination

Clients of healers and witches ranged from Valletta courtesans to priests. Jewish women peddlers appear to have been most successful and were much sought after for love magic potions at least throughout the seventeenth century. In 1601 a young Jewess called Maria was accused of preparing love potions for one Marietta Zammit of Vittoriosa, known as di Cagliari. Marietta sought Maria's advice so as to ensure that her lover would return to her. In 1659 the Gozitan Petronilla Cammilleri who lived in Valletta explained that several Valletta courtesans had resorted to spells to attract their boy friends and customers. Petronilla herself had been instructed how to prepare some spells by a 40 year-old Jewess who served as peddler in the streets of Valletta but who had left for her country, or more precisely redeemed from slavery, some time before. Likewise in 1677 the Valletta courtesan Bartholomea Marventana (donna del mondo) consulted a Jewess called Zaccaria who promptly prepared a love philtre which would allegedly make Bartholomea's lover return to her.

Of particular interest is the trial of a Jewess, the peddler Reina, who sold sublimate in the streets of Valletta. Reina was accused in 1624 by a fellow co-religionist – the 17 year-old Judah son of Isach – for practising magic: ...Reina that fair Jewess who sells sublimate .... Judah claimed that Reina was reputed a most wretched woman among the Jews of Malta. However, after further probing into the matter, the Inquisitor soon learned that Reina had threatened Judah with maleficient magic and as a result treated the denouncement more as a personal vendetta than a genuine deposition.

However by early 1625 a fair tall unnamed Jewess from the Vittoriosa slaves' prison, who sold sublimate in the streets, was accused of witchcraft. The same woman was even denounced in 1626. In all probability the woman in question, in both instances, was Reina.

18 The two women conversed in Italian perhaps indicating that the Jewess Maria was a temporary resident in Malta, or that at least she was brought from elsewhere. AIM Crim., 20B, case 111, fols. 457-458: 22 May, 1601.
19 ...una certa donna hebrea d'anni 40 in circa quale andava vendendo robbe per le strade, et un pezzo fa andò al suo paese... AIM Crim., vol. 70A, case 58, fol.210: 5 November, 1659.
21 ...Reina hebrea quella bianca che va vendendo il solimato ...: AIM Crim., vol. 44A, case 41, fol.319: 23 August, 1624.
22 ...fra li bebrei è senuta la più trista... Ibid.
23 AIM Crim., vol. 44A, case 41, fol. 319-v: 23 August, 1624.
In the first instance a 40 year-old widow and courtesan Imperia from Mdina, approached the Jewess and asked her to help her boy friend, a Sicilian priest, overcome impotency. The unnamed Jewess supplied a potion which the widow had to mix with her lover’s food. Other remedies were later tried. At one point Imperia was asked to dip in water a piece of paper on which something had been written. After this, she had to wash her genital area with the water and then mix it with her lover’s drink. The Jewess received the sum of eight tari for her services but the remedies were reported to be ineffective and the priest remained impotent. The Jewess was later asked to prepare other remedies at the house of the priest in Valletta and the Jewess was again paid well. But once more the remedies were ineffective. In the end, Imperia reported the Jewess to the Holy Office claiming that her remedies were performed through the intervention of magic and the devil. Luckily for the Jewess the Inquisition did not take this accusation seriously and no action was taken against her.

It seems that the Jewess took the accusations lightly and continued to prepare love magic potions as the following year she was reported again. This time she was said to have offered to prepare a love charm for another woman.

Jews were involved in warding off the evil eye. Widespread belief in the baneful influences of the evil eye are a common feature still recurring today throughout the Mediterranean. In Malta the ‘evil eye’ refers to the power, alleged to be possessed by some individuals, of inflicting injury, or producing illness simply by looking at a person whom they wished to harm. This practice is nowhere better demonstrated than in the case of Giovanni Francesco Gauci, a seemingly well-off gentleman from Vittoriosa, who took heed of the advice of four healers in his frantic effort to cure his wife from the evil eye. One of the healers hailed from Malta, two from Sicily, and the fourth was a Jewess from Tunisia. All healers from the three neighbouring states adopted similar methods for the cure of the evil eye.

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26 ‘...quella donna hebrea donna grande di persona bianca che sta in casa vicino la pregione di schiavi quale va vendendo del solimato e dell’ altre cose ma non so suo nome me disse che se volevo mi haveria dato un pezzo di pietra di calamita per farmi amare...’ (...that Jewish woman, a tall fair skinned woman, who lives in the house next to the slaves’ prison who sells sublimate and other items, whose name I do not know told me that could readily provide me with a piece of magnet stone to make myself loved if I so wished...). AIM Crim., vol. 45A, case 154, fol 274: 27 March, 1626.
The Malta-based healer had asked Gauci for some of his wife’s clothing. The same could be said of the expert advice of a priest healer from Catania and a woman healer from Syracuse both of whom were offered a free passage to Malta. They both declined the offer although the two of them suggested that Gauci should send them a piece of clothing belonging to the sick woman. Finally Gauci asked a Maltese friend, who was visiting Tunisia, to consult an unnamed Jewess, renowned for her abilities to cure the ‘obsessed’ and those suffering from the evil eye. Yet again the Jewess asked for some piece of clothing belonging to Gauci’s wife and she sent him a root of a plant and a small jug of water that had to be sprinkled on the wife’s face. The Jewess sent other healing items to Gauci, via his friend in Tunis, but none of them helped to improve his wife’s health.

It seems that the popularity of the practitioners grew as one neighbour recommended the healing or witchcraft practices of a particular individual to another. The Valletta widow Maria Gilibert was encouraged to consult a young Jewish woman, the slave of the Italian knight Fra Bacio Bandinelli. Maria did so and the Jewess poured some oil in a jug and then placed a piece of bread and some salt in the jug. The diviner then looked at a mirror and predicted that within three months Maria would be bed-ridden although she would live for another three-and-a-half years. Maria paid the Jewess three grani for the omen. Later Maria denounced the Jewess for having practised divination. It appears many women had consulted the Jewess and it is therefore not surprising that one of these women readily came forward to denounce the unnamed Jewess at the Holy Office.

On another occasion a Jewess, once again a peddler was consulted by the fourteen year-old Cospicua girl, Andreana, wife of the French sailor Paulo Martin. The Jewess could well have been the same one consulted by Maria Gilibert and her neighbours in Valletta as she made use of a water jug to predict the future. On this occasion the predicament was positive. Andreana was told that her husband would return to Malta within three months. She also predicted that her sister’s husband, likewise a sailor, would arrive within a month. She added that the galley squadron was bound to reach Malta from Messina.

29 The Commendatore Bacio Bandinelli was the first agent in Malta of the Venice ransom society. Cecil Roth, says that Bandinelli acted as agent ‘from the time of the organisation of the Society in 1648 down to about 1670, when he was forced to give up by reason of his years’. C. ROTH, ‘The Jews of Malta’, in Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society 12 (1931), 187-251 esp. p. 224.
30 The woman was Margarita, wife of Fontanei d’Abran, from Valletta. AIM Crim., vol. 58A, case 617, fol.296-v: 17 October, 1644.
within five days. The five days passed and the galley squadron did not reach the Malta harbour. But the girls remained hopeful. When a month passed and Giovanella’s husband had not yet returned, both Andreana and Giovanella began to doubt the predicament 31.

The presence of a multitude of non-Christian slaves, who wandered freely in both town and countryside, mixing with the local population, induced the Inquisitors and ecclesiastical authorities to keep a wary eye over these slaves and treat them with contempt. The inhabitants who resorted to their medications often willingly denounced them to the Holy Office especially when the medical intervention failed to achieve the desired effect. The little we know of these diviners we have deduced from their contact with the state and religious institutions — especially the tribunal of the Inquisition — that sought to control, monitor and repress them.

We know almost nothing as to what happened to them; how they mingled with other segments of the population such as the urban poor with whom they apparently shared much — such as a common patois, marginality, even religious beliefs. The fact that the majority of slaves hailed from the Maghreb territories of North Africa made it easy for the Maltese to communicate with them. Arabic was written in a different script but the spoken word was not much different from Maltese and made communication between the locals and the slaves relatively easy. As a result the Muslim slaves, and to some extent the much smaller Jewish minority, could mingle freely with the locals despite the strict prohibitions by Church and State 32.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the prejudices that emerge, these archival references confirm that the local Christian population interacted with the non-Christian slaves, Muslim and Jewish alike, with apparently little social unease. At the same time the authorities must have viewed the continuous contact between the two communities with some degree of apprehension. Both the Grand Master and the Inquisitors, as Apostolic Delegates in Malta, often aired their concern with the Holy See.

31 Andreana described the Jewess as ‘...donna giovane di giusta statura ne grassa ne magra argentina, quale va vendendo per le strade...’ (a young woman, of medium height and build, with silvery hair). AIM Crim., vol. 61A, case 101, fol.501: 23 December, 1647.

But one must bear in mind that at grass roots level there was a stark difference in the belief systems of the ruling elite and those of the masses of the Christian population. One may even suggest that the formal Catholic doctrine (based on the rigid principles of the Council of Trent) and the religious beliefs of the masses, (based on their daily needs and preoccupations) ran on parallel lines hardly ever meet.

Rather than being regarded as morally reprehensible or 'wicked,' divination and popular healing were primarily seen as a kind of instrument that could be used for good purposes — to heal the sick, to recover hidden treasure, and to predict the future. It could also be used for evil purposes — to make others fall ill, or to make men impotent. In theory, the Church condemned every form of magic since in the view of theologians it required at least a tacit understanding with the devil. Nonetheless, the people, and sometimes priests themselves, were far removed from this theologically-rationalist approach. Cases of sorcery, witchcraft, magic, healing or divination thus ranked high in the Inquisition proceedings and were resorted to by members of all sectors of society.

33 In 1647 two 32 year-old priests confessed that, at the age of sixteen, they had practised some experiments read in a manuscript. Among other recipes, the book included some for immunity against fire-arms and others on love magic. They tried love magic experiments by throwing fingernail pairings, and nut leaves, inscribed with blood-written words in boiling oil. AIM Crim., vol. 61A case 45 fol. 219, cfr. C. CASSAR, 'Witchcraft beliefs and social control in seventeenth century Malta', in Journal of Mediterranean Studies 3, 2 (1993), 316-334, esp. p. 324; see also: M.R. O'NEIL, 'Sacerdote ovvero strione. Ecclesiastical and superstitious remedies in 16th century Italy'; S. L. KAPLAN (ed.), Understanding Popular Culture. Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century, New York 1984.