



MerĦbA

Maltese Historical Association (Aust) Inc
(Għaqda Storika Maltija (Awstralija) Inkorporata)

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MHA Newsletter

APRIL 2014

MerĦba! Welcome to all the members and friends of the Maltese Historical Association.

In this newsletter you will find another article in the series on Maltese cities. This month features the city of Vittoriosa or Birgu as it is still popularly known.

It is followed by a brief summary of our last talk by Albert Agius on, "Superstitions and the Maltese Bogeymen". A longer version may be found on the MHA website. As anticipated, it was a thoroughly enjoyable evening with many people sharing their stories and childhood experiences.

Professor Maurice Cauchi will be giving our next talk about the origins and significance of Maltese surnames. It will be of great interest and there will be the opportunity to find out about your own surname.

It has been a busy month, as Joseph Borg and I are in the process of updating the MHA website. It is quite a time consuming process, especially for beginners such as us, so please be patient! We are deeply indebted to Edwin Borg Manche for developing and maintaining the website for all of us in the MHA for so long. You can help by visiting the website frequently at www.mha.org.au Also, please note that the MHA contact email address has been upgraded from the gmail one I gave you last month to the official one: secretary@mha.org.au.

We would love some feedback!

We found a number of emails and e-newsletters from the Federation of Australian Historical Societies Inc., which can be accessed on their website: <http://www.history.org.au>

I have been in contact with Frank Scicluna, the Honorary Consul for Malta in South Australia, where there is a large and active Maltese community. The website and newsletters contain a number of excellent articles. Visit www.ozmalta.page4.me for the website.

Of particular relevance this month is an article on Maltese Anzacs: www.maltanzac.jimdo.com.

The newsletters can be found at:

<http://www.starsandstripesmalta.com/COMISAN.html>

The March issue includes articles on Carmen Testa from West Sunshine, traditional Maltese foods, St Paul's Catacombs in Rabat, The Malta Railway, Ta Pinu sanctuary, and Malta the Nurse of the Mediterranean, as well as interesting snippets, old photographs and paper advertisements from the 1940/50's. It is an excellent read.

Coming Events:

On Sunday 6th April the Maltese Ex-Services Association Malta GC RSL sub branch will commemorate the 72nd Anniversary of the award of the George Cross to the island fortress of Malta. Mass will held at the chapel next to the Maltese Community Centre, Parkville. Please be seated by 2.15 p.m. for a 2.30 p.m. start. Associations and individuals are invited to lay wreaths or flowers at the memorial afterwards.

Sunday 13th April the Maltese Australian Association will be commemorating the 72nd Anniversary of the Malta George Cross Award at the Shrine of Remembrance with the laying of the wreath at the Cenotaph at 11.30 am followed by a commemoration at the Shelter of Peace.

Also on 13th April, but at 1.30 pm, there is a performance of the Passion Play at Ruffey Lake Park, Church Road (off King St), Doncaster. An outdoor re-enactment of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is well worth seeing. Car parking and entry are free. For more information see www.passionplay.info.

Anzac Day on the 25th April will be the 99th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing. The Maltese Ex-Services Association of Victoria will be assembling at 11.00 am at Federation Square for the Anzac Day March. "Lest we forget".

Looking forwards to seeing you at the Maltese Community Centre on the 15th of April, if not before.

Charles Gatt (Secretary)

Città Vittoriosa (Birgu)



Città Vittoriosa or Birgu as it is still known by the Maltese is a very old locality on the south side of the Grand Harbour in Malta, with its origins reaching back to medieval times. The city occupies a promontory of land with Fort St Angelo at its head and the city of Cospicua at its base. There is some evidence of prehistoric human settlement and archaeological evidence of a Roman temple.



The fort or 'Castrum Maris' (Castle by the sea) extends into the centre of the Grand Harbour and has been documented since the early thirteenth century, during which time Malta was being passed from the Normans to the Hohenstauffens then to the Angevins. In 1283 an Aragonese fleet headed by admiral Roger de Loria defeated the Angevins in a naval battle in the Grand Harbour, close to its entrance. However it took some time for the defending Angevins to be dislodged from Fort St Angelo.

The Aragonese were, at least initially, more welcomed by the inhabitants than the ousted Angevins. The use in the feast of St Lawrence of variants of the flag with horizontal red and yellow stripes i.e. the Senera de Aragon possibly dates back to this time of rule by the Kingdom of Aragon, when the veneration of 'San Lorenzo' started in Birgu.

When the Knights, led by Grand Master de l'Isle Adam, arrived in 1530, they made Birgu the capital

city of Malta, thanks to its fort, safe anchorage and access to the grand harbour, whereas the former capital, [Mdina](#), was inland and did not suit their naval requirements.

Birgu was renamed 'Citta Nuova' i.e. the new city and became the seat of Government in Malta. The Knights built and sheltered their ships in Birgu and had their armoury, treasury, hospital and other public and administrative buildings there. Their living quarters were mostly in the area they called the Collachio.

In preparation for an attack by the Ottoman Empire, Birgu and Fort St Angelo were fortified in 1551 and strengthened in 1554. The fort was separated from the city by a narrow channel but connected by means of a drawbridge.

During the [Siege of Malta](#) by the Ottomans in 1565. Birgu and Fort St Angelo played most important roles, attacking the besiegers based on 'Mount Sciberras', resupplying Fort St Elmo until it was destroyed, and notably when the De Guiral battery foiled an Ottoman attack by sea on the neighbouring fortified town of 'Senglea'.



The Siege of Malta: Turkish Bombardment of Birgu, 6 July 1565

The focus of the Ottoman artillery, as depicted in the painting, is the hornwork of the Post of Castille which they bombarded from 'Mount Salvatore' and from the promontory which is now called 'Bighi'. The besiegers breached the fortifications only to be repulsed by the defenders. This part of Birgu is known to this day as 'il-prexxa' (probably a corruption of the Italian 'breccia').

After four months of successful defence by the Knights, Birgu was almost captured by the Ottoman army in August 1565, when their underground explosives collapsed a large part of the Bastion of Castille Post. An injured 70 year old Grand Master de la Valette led his knights and soldiers, as well as a throng of men, women and children prepared to fight to the death and repelled the invaders. Further forces arrived shortly after and the siege was abandoned. Birgu was given the title '*Città Vittoriosa*', Italian for "Victorious City".

Almost immediately work began on building a new capital city on the Sciberras peninsula across the harbour. When the Knights transferred their convent and seat to the new capital, Valletta, in 1571 Birgu lost much of its importance.

After the taking of Malta by Napoleon in 1798, and the subsequent rebellion by the Maltese, the British were invited to Malta in 1800. The British Navy made Birgu its base in the Mediterranean, remaining there until 1979.

Even during peacetime Birgu was not spared its military associations. A massive explosion in the gunpowder magazine in 1806 caused terrible loss of life and damage which is discernible to this day.

Birgu suffered greatly in the Second World War, due to its proximity to the dockyards. Its inhabitants were either evacuated or spent much time in air raid shelters. Air raids destroyed or severely damaged many historic buildings, such as the clock tower in the main square, the Churches of the



Annunciation and of St Lawrence, and the old armoury (armerija) of the Knights of the Order of St John.

Though mainly a naval base, Fort Saint Angelo's anti-aircraft defences ensured that the oldest sea fortress in Malta was once again engaged in defending the island.

Large scale reconstruction resourced by the War Damage Commission took place following the war, although many of the developments then and since have been controversial.

St. Lawrence's Church was once the Conventual Church of the Order of St John. Badly damaged in WWII, it has been rebuilt. The saint's day is celebrated on August 10, with decorations in the streets and festa starting on 31 July.



Another famous church in Birgu is Our Lady of the Annunciation also known as St. Dominic's Church. The feast of Saint Dominic Guzman is held every last Sunday of August.

The central piazza in Birgu, Misrah ir-Rebha (Victory Square), was badly damaged by bombing but one 19th-century palace thought to have been designed by Giuseppe Bonavia survives and is used as the headquarters of the St Lawrence Band Club. It is hoped that the rebuilding of the iconic clock tower will become a reality.

The historic waterfront contains the former Palace of the General of the Galleys and the treasury of the Order of St John. The area was refurbished in the early 2000s, and both buildings are used for other activities: the former is now a casino, while the latter is home to the Malta Maritime Museum. A second museum, the Vittoriosa 1565 Museum, is also located in the town and is dedicated to the siege and the battle in the town in 1565.

Birgu also contains six Auberges of the Knights, including the Auberge d'Angleterre, for some time the home of the English Knights of St John on the island, which now contains a public library.



The humble St Anne's chapel in the upper part of Fort St Angelo was built in 1430 by the family de Nava who owned the Castrum Maris until the arrival of the Knights in 1530. Its ceiling is supported by a pink

Egyptian granite column, a relic of the ancient ruins seen by Johannes Quintin, entrusted by the Knights to give reports about the state of Malta before their arrival. The monument and temple were dedicated to Astarte by the Phoenicians probably in 1400 B.C. but later they were dedicated to Juno by the Romans in 218 B.C.

In 1998, the Maltese Government conceded the upper part of Fort St Angelo to the Order of St John, for 99 years.

Famous people from Birgu include Girolamo Cassar who designed many of the buildings in Valletta in the sixteenth century; Lorenzo Gafà (1638–1703), who designed many of the buildings in the Waterfront area and worked on a number of churches, including St. Paul's Cathedral in Mdina; and Paul Boffa (1890-1962) the country's first Labour Party Prime Minister (1947 – 1950).

March talk: March 2014 SUPERSTITIONS AND THE MALTESE BOGEY MEN by Albert Agius

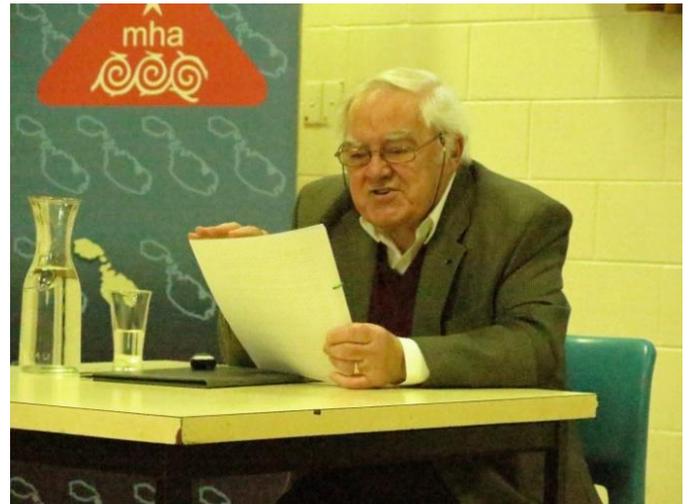
Our Speaker for March was Mr Albert Agius, who referred to learned researchers in Maltese culture and folklore, such as Pullicino and Castagna.

Some superstitions and beliefs that our ancestors believed in were widespread, such as misfortune from breaking a mirror or walking under a ladder. Some things could be omens of good luck as well as of bad luck. Pirates of the 19th century believed that it's a sign of bad luck if a black cat walks towards you, but good luck if it walks away. The Scottish believe that a strange black cat's arrival to the home signifies prosperity, while in the English Midlands, a black cat as a wedding present is thought to bring good luck to the bride!

The phobia of Friday the 13th has a strong connection with religion. There were 13 people present at the Last Supper and Christ was crucified on that day. Some biblical scholars believe that Eve tempted Adam on a Friday and that Abel was slain by his brother Cain on Friday the 13th. It has many repercussions on business and travel. Some people refuse to have thirteen people around a table for a meal because one of them could die within 24 hours!

If someone dreams about leisure and an easy life, it means they will be unemployed for a long time and suffer hunger. Dreaming about the sea means turbulent times ahead. Dreams about fish indicate good luck, though presumably not if the fish are in the sea! People who dream about wheat will shed a lot of tears because of a tragedy that would befall him.

A pregnant woman who craves food she smells or sees must be given some, otherwise the baby will be born with a birth-mark. Whoever does not offer her food will grow a stye (xgħira) around his eye. If a pregnant woman looks at a dead or deformed person the unborn child will have a tendency to swoon (tgħoxa) when it cried. To avoid this, the



mother must look at her own reflection in water in a basin (friskatur) and wash her face with the same water.

The Maltese proverb, '*Sal-erbgħin il-qabar miftuħ*', translates literally to, 'The coffin is open up to forty'. Nowadays it is taken to mean that, after giving birth, a woman should be very careful of her health for 40 days. However, Canon Agius De Soldanis (1712-1770) recorded that if two new mothers met in the first forty days after delivery, one of them would die!

Some odd proverbs include, '*Twelid f'Santa Marija jiġi msejjaħ għat-tiġrija*', which means, 'Born on St Mary's Feast he is called for the (horse) racing' and, '*Tifla titwieled nhar ta' Ġimgħa fl-istess jum il-kelb jigdimha*' meaning, 'A girl born on Friday will be bitten by a dog on the same day'.

Many cultures believe in the evil eye, a malevolent look that can cause injury or misfortune. In Malta, belief in the evil eye (*L-Għajn*) is very wide spread and everybody has their own interpretation. The evil eye is commonly accepted as a fact even, according to some people, by the Church. Some people believe a line of salt on the floor behind the front door will prevent the evil eye from entering the house. More powerfully, a house can be cleansed of negative energies by burning olive tree leaves while saying prayers. This is known in Maltese as '*It-Tbaħħir*'.

Cow-horns hanging from walls are believed to protect the home from the evil eye. In Malta, and in other countries such as Italy, it is believed that making the sign of the *Qrun* (bull's horn) will deflect such evil. The *Qrun* is made by closing the fist and pointing the index finger and little finger and it is considered permissible to do such a sign behind your back to ward off any evil. Oddly, people, especially children, form this *Qrun* when wishing to curse others' good luck by invoking the Bedudu, such as when playing marbles. So the *Qrun* can both protect against bad luck and wish bad luck on others!

Various 'spectres' in Maltese mythology include *il-Fatat*, *il-Ħares* and the Babaw or Gagaw or Kaw Kaw. The Babaw is a 'slimy greyish bogey man' who strolls the streets at night. Smelling the breath of naughty boys, he would stretch his snail-like body through any gap to enter their room, grin with his toothless gaping mouth, and frighten them out of their wits or give them nightmares so they wake up screaming in a cold sweat.

Peter Paul Castagna (1827-1907) states that all those who were born on Christmas Eve would, during their sleep, change and become a phantom on their birthday. They would roam the streets, baying like wild dogs and frightening everyone. Before dawn they would then return home to their beds exhausted and take back their human form as they wake up. This activity was said to be a punishment because Jesus did not wish anybody to be born at the same time as he did!

It is said that many women used to check on their husbands and their children to ensure that they were still asleep in their bed during the night. To remedy the situation, one had to take a sieve (*għarbiel* or *passatur*) in their hands and stay up all night from eleven until the Pater Noster (6 am) counting the number of holes in the sieve !!

Mr Agius said that he was convinced that at some stage during our childhood in Malta we were all intimidated by the *BABAW*. When we were naughty our parents often used to make us behave by mentioning this kind of goblin

that would punish us for our misbehaviour. Most children believed in the existence of such a being, though probably everyone had a different image of what the Babaw was.

Some parents used to scare their children by telling them that if they persisted in their misdemeanours, they would be put in a sack by someone and taken away from the family. The man in question would often be '*Tal-Ħabbgħaziż*', one of the North African men who used to roam the streets hawking their wares, mostly Oriental sweets and seeds or nuts.

Mr Agius then spoke about two other phantoms, *il-Fatat* and *il-Ħares*. According to Erin Serracino Inglott, '*il-Fatat*' is a shadow of a dead or imaginary person, which generally appears at night. It is like a soul or a spirit which, through some magic, one imagines seeing in front of him especially in a house the spectre used to inhabit.

Serracino Inglott states that '*il-Ħares*' was a phantom found in old houses but it did not usually do any damage and actually protected the tenants from trouble. Castagna elaborates that the *Ħares* takes the form of a serpent, protects the house and brings good fortune to any babies born in the house. For this reason serpents should not be killed. Despite this, many people still choose to not live in a haunted house.

After the lecture many in the audience participated in a discussion, especially in relation to the 'spectres'. The opinions of a 'fatat' ranged from a 'fairy-like' creature to a 'poltergeist'. It was suggested that the word babaw originated in Venice from 'Bauta', meaning the mask and cape worn at carnival. Other spectres were mentioned such as the *Belliegħa* and *Waħx*. Many had their own family name for such notions. Maybe this subject could be researched in greater detail for a future talk.

Note: This is a summary of Albert Agius' talk. A more detailed version may be found on the MHA website.

Maltese Surnames in Malta and Gozo:

Their history, origin, significance and incidence and what they tell us about the Maltese nation

by

Professor Maurice Cauchi

7.30 pm Tuesday 15th April 2014

Maltese Community Centre Parkville

All welcome

Surnames play an important role in the identity of a nation and its history. It is indeed difficult to imagine a population that did not have clearly defined surnames.

Time was when surnames did not exist. For a time, nicknames played a role in identifying relationships, but not individuals.

In Malta surnames have been recorded since the time of the Arab occupation, and indeed Semitic names still form a very substantial proportion of all surnames. With the influx of Europeans, a large number of surnames from Europe and particularly Sicily have become incorporated.

It is no surprise that the 10 most common surnames in Malta and Gozo have been with us at least since 1400. A study of the recent census gives us a clear idea about the distribution of surnames amongst the community. This shows how different localities are characterised by a small number of surnames. One could also say that some surnames are very distinctive of towns and villages in Malta.

The meaning of surnames is also of interest. Originally, surnames were given to highlight the social or individual characteristics of the person concerned. Many other surnames relate to some nickname. Not infrequently, more than one meaning has been attributed to a particular surname. In this talk, examples of such meanings will be discussed.

Of interest also is the way that surnames indicate changes in the demography of a country. Comparisons between incidence of surnames over the years can be useful to determine the homogeneity of a population, and how that is rapidly changing.

Anyone interested in finding out the meaning of his or her surname will have an opportunity to check this. A dictionary of surnames by Dr Mario Cassar will be available for consultation.

Professor Maurice Cauchi

Professor Maurice Cauchi arrived in Australia in March 1969 and started life here as Senior Lecturer at Monash University Medical School.

He soon became involved in Maltese affairs, first with the Maltese Literature Group, of which he became President, and then with the Maltese Community Council of Victoria of which he was, and still is, President. He also was elected President of the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria in 1990.

In 1992 he left for Malta to take the position of Professor of Pathology. During this time he was involved with the setting up of the Migration Museum and he set up the website 'maltamigration.com' which contains a collection of information about Maltese living abroad, including a vast collection of historical information about migration.

He returned to Australia in 2003 and again became involved with the Maltese Community Council of Victoria.

Professor Cauchi has been very active in promoting publications relating to Maltese settlement in Australia, first with the Maltese paper 'Il- Maltija', and through several books which he has published, including the latest one: "Under One Umbrella", which is a history of the MCCV and the Maltese community in Victoria. Copies are available for sale for anyone who is interested.



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