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THE MALTESE IN TUNISIA BEFORE THE PROTECTORATE, 1850S-1870S: TOWARDS A REVISED IMAGE

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During the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, increasing numbers of Europeans migrated to the Regency of Tunis. Maltese represented over half of these migrants from the north, and yet little is known about the Maltese contribution to pre-colonial Tunisian society. Many northern European contemporaries noted the Maltese presence, but their writings have limitations that are outlined here. This paper considers new source material, the documents of the British consular authorities, who closely monitored and assisted their Maltese charges. This material suggests that we revise our image of the Maltese. While we find further evidence of Maltese poverty and liminality, abundant evidence suggests that Maltese seafarers were aware of and in many cases even exploited their liminal social status to their advantage. A revised portrait of a European population working alongside their Tunisian counterparts emerges.

Introduction: European Migration to Tunisia

Before the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1881, the 'Regency of Tunis' was a semi-independent outpost of the Ottoman Empire controlled by its own hereditary rulers, or Beys. The tiny state was situated between two threatening reminders of what could happen if its leaders made a wrong move: Algeria, to the West, was under direct French control after a protracted and brutal war that started in 1830, and Tripolitania (Libya), was once semi-autonomous like Tunis, but the local dynasty was overthrown and Turkish direct rule imposed in 1835. Tunisia's Beys accordingly carried out a dangerous game throughout much of the 19th century: rapprochement with European nations helped check potential threats from the Ottoman Empire, and the Regency's official status as a dependency of the Turkish empire was underscored when European states seemed too interested in Tunisian affairs.¹

Consulate offices of European powers had been established in the Regency for several hundred years, yet until the early part of the nineteenth century, few Europeans other than consulate officers and their families

lived there voluntarily, for it was too risky: the enslaving of Christians was legal until the first decades of the nineteenth century.² With the abolition of this practise by 1818, increased stability in Tunisia at this time and more regular relationships with Europe, poorer Europeans began to emigrate to Tunisia.³ By 1834 there were some 8,000 Europeans settled there. The vast majority were from Malta, but large numbers came from other islands in the Western Mediterranean including Sicily, Panfelleria, Sardinia, and the Balearic Islands (see map, Figure 1). Most Europeans settled in Tunis; however some Maltese in particular moved to the smaller coastal towns, like Sousse and Sfax.

Maltese immigration to Tunisia was part of a larger Maltese emigration movement that spanned much of the nineteenth century. Emigration from Malta was motivated by a series of epidemics, economic hardships, and the problems associated with the islands burgeoning population compounded by its striking lack of natural resources.⁴ By the 1840s, approximately 20,000 Maltese were living in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Constantinople, Greece

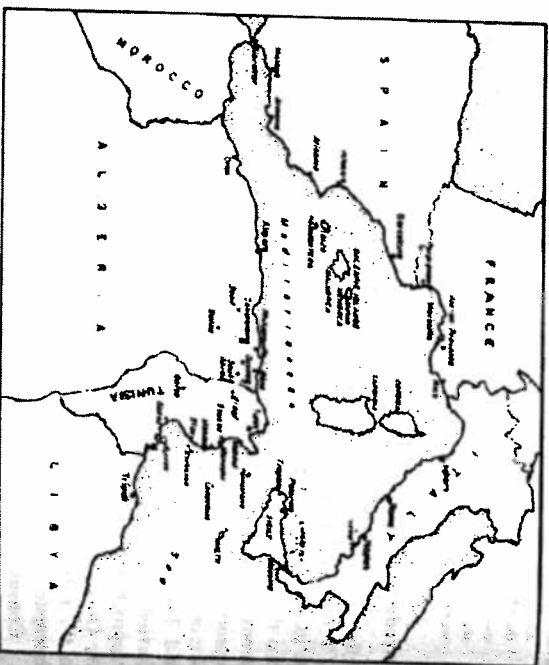


Fig. 1 Principal Sites of Immigration to Tunisia.

and Tripoli, representing some 15% of the total Maltese population.⁵ This migration was characterized by a high degree of spontaneity and mobility. Not only did Maltese migrants land in one Tunisian city, only to head on to Algeria and then later to Egypt,⁶ for example, but there was an extremely high rate of re-migration: Price estimates that approximately 85% of those leaving between 1840 to 1890 returned to Malta.⁷ This mobility and high return rate are partly explained by Malta's proximity to North Africa. The trip to Tunisia could be made easily in small fishing boats for only a few shillings. People having difficulties in Malta could try their luck as fishermen, day labourers and so forth in North Africa with little investment, and return home if they did not succeed. But Price argues that Maltese chose destinations closer to home purposefully, intending to ultimately return. They did not participate in significant numbers in the 19th century cross-Atlantic migrations from Europe.⁸ Costs were not the only issue here, for all free emigration schemes planned by British officials and private organizations for more remote destinations like Jamaica or Crete were notoriously unsuccessful.

While conditions in Malta were difficult, they were not always better overseas. In Ottoman-ruled countries like the Regency of Tunis, farming was not an easy undertaking because Muslim law prohibited non-Muslims from owning real property there until the 1860s. Immigrants risked threats of serious epidemics, violence, and political unrest.⁹ However, there was also a growing need for semi-skilled, European-trained carpenters, masons, cobblers, glass-cutters, smiths and so forth as North African rulers began modernization programmes. Maltese among other Europeans were finding these kinds of jobs in Egypt under Mehmet Ali from 1814 on.¹⁰ Independent merchants were also finding North Africa of increasing interest. Small towns along the coast of Tunis such as Sfax or Sousse were of less interest to big European firms; however a smaller trader could bring in European products such as tobacco, material or wine in their *speronera*, a small sailboat of 50 to 150 tons, and bring back raw materials such as oil, hides, cattle, or cereals. Once merchants such as these were established, there would be a need in the small port towns for shopkeepers, agents, boatmen, wine-shop owners, tobacconists and so forth.

Europeans in mid-19th century Tunisia

Population estimates for Europeans in Tunisia by the middle of the 19th century give some idea of the dimension of immigration there, but probably are quite inaccurate. Because newcomers usually did not register with their respective consular offices,¹¹ estimates put forward by consulates based in Tunisia vary widely. Some substantial percentage arrived without

passports and consequently estimates derived from records of the places of departure are also approximate.¹² The best modern source treating this question is Ganiage's *La population européenne de Tunis au milieu du XIX^e siècle*.¹³ Ganiage studied parish records of the main Catholic Church of Tunis, St. Croix, 1840s to 1860s. These records indicate that there were 12,064 Catholics in Tunisia in 1856, and 9,150 in the city of Tunis alone.¹⁴ Ganiage notes that these numbers should be increased, perhaps even doubled, due to the considerable number of people with no fixed address and the fact that some potentially sizeable portions of the population, such as celibate men, rarely appear in church records.¹⁵ Further, these records do not include the small numbers of Protestants or Greek Orthodox there at the time. Taking into consideration these records and estimates provided by the various consulate offices, Ganiage suggests that during the 1850s and 1860s, there were some 6 to 7,000 Maltese in Tunisia, representing at least 60% of the European population, along with 4,000 Italians,¹⁶ approximately 250 Greeks and 50 to 60 French families. The Maltese continued to comprise at least 60% of the European population as a whole until the 1870s, when they were equaled and then surpassed by the growing numbers of Italians. However, Maltese remained the overwhelming majority in coastal towns like Sousse, Sfax or Mahdia, well until the next century.¹⁷

Ganiage gleaned additional information from the St. Croix parish records. In his 1845 to 1864 sample, he found individuals' professions indicated in 290 cases. He found that Italians were predominantly manual labourers, with occupations listed including masons, carpenters, fishermen or sailors, millers and bakers, and a smaller number as traders or their employes. Occupations for the Maltese, by far the largest population recorded in the registers, were rarely noted, however, and Ganiage reports on only 16 carpenters, 5 blacksmiths, 11 merchants, 4 tavern keepers or waiters, and 2 cart-drivers. This list of occupations is noteworthy for its especially small number of cart-drivers. Perhaps most cart-drivers were young men and thus did not surface in Ganiage's church records. But the scarcity of occupations noted for the Maltese in general is puzzling. There may have been a language barrier between priests and parishioners. It is also possible that these new immigrants were engaged in what they viewed as temporary trades, or trades different from those practised in Malta, and thus did not feel comfortable claiming them as their occupation for the parish records.

Considering that the Maltese were the most numerous of the Europeans in pre-Protectorate Tunisia, it is surprising how little is known about their

contributions to this period of Tunisian history. Knowledge of the Maltese has been hampered in part by the fact that they remained largely an exotic curiosity to most Europeans writing about Tunisia. Most published travel and other guides from the 19th century refer to them only briefly, and usually noting their supposed predilection for vice, contraband or violence. These writers were particularly struck by the Maltese propensity to the local indigenous population: the Maltese spoke a similar language, wore similar clothes and lived in similar neighborhoods. Unfortunately, then, this is mainly what we know about the Maltese in Tunisia: their curious 'liminal' social and economic status, which in fact may tell us more about contemporary visions of 'European-ness' than about the Maltese themselves.

The rest of this article is devoted to filling in some of the gaps regarding this population. First, the depiction of the Maltese found in published primary sources and Ganiage's writings will be presented and claims of Maltese liminality reviewed, followed by a closer look at details about the Maltese from these sources. Subsequently, a revised image will be developed based on documents from the British consulate offices of Tunisia.

Contemporary European Writers and Maltese Liminality

The Maltese were clearly 'noticed' by mid-nineteenth century travel writers and archaeologists, who were almost unanimous in highlighting their ambiguous social position. Contemporary writers found the poor, Arabic-speaking Catholic Maltese difficult to define, and often resorted to identifying them as a hybrid people, manifesting a mixed culture and appearance, and serving as a bridge between the Occident and Orient.¹⁸ They were uneasy about classifying them as 'Europeans'. For example, when he put forward population figures for the Regency in 1838, Dumant wrote that the European population, *if we include the Maltese*, is a bit more than 12,000 people.¹⁹ This confusion surrounded not only the Maltese in North Africa, but Malta itself. Charmes, who stopped in Malta on his way to Tunisia, noted several times in his 1888 publication that he found it difficult to say whether Malta should belong to Europe or Africa. In the end, he equivocated, stating that the island 'is part of both continents. Its sterile earth, burnt by the sun . . . seems more African than European. . . . As for the Maltese language, we know that this patois is simply a corrupt Arabic.'²⁰ Ironically, even the strong Catholicity of the Maltese, which stemmed from the long presence of the Order of St. John on the island, the last bastion of Christianity against the Ottoman Empire, placed the Maltese closer to the Orient than the Occident in the imagination of writers like Faucon:

regarding their faith, they are as intolerant as Arabs. Furthermore this is not the only similarity that they have with the latter. They are called "Christian Arabs", and this is not inexact. Their bone structure, features, language, temperament, custom, all reveal their Arab blood."²¹

These observations of the Maltese are rich with underlying assumptions about 'European-ness' and the 'Orient', and one could undertake an interesting analysis to that effect. For now it is sufficient to point out that most of these writers brought various preconceptions about Europe with them to Tunisia, which undoubtedly shaped their understandings of the cultures and livelihoods of the poorer Europeans they encountered there. The treatment of the Maltese in these texts must be examined with a critical eye. However, once a more detailed picture of the Maltese is developed from archival sources, it will be shown that the Maltese did in fact operate as a kind of intermediary population between the Europeans and the Tunisians. While this ambiguous status may have caused Northern European observers some discomfort, during this period in Tunisia, their social liminality seems to have been embraced by some Maltese, who would find in it the key to their livelihoods and sometimes great prosperity.

Observations of liminality aside, the Maltese feature only briefly in contemporary accounts. Pellissier, who traveled to Tunisia in the 1840s, describes them as a 'mass' involved in 'various lame occupations, especially contraband'.²² De Flaux tells us that they carried out the most arduous jobs, but also found them 'overly superstitious, fervent Catholics, ignorant, greedy, haughty and argumentative'.²³ Dumant notes that most cart and carriage drivers, some 400 of them in the Tunis area alone, he estimates, were Maltese.²⁴

This burgeoning population of European immigrants needed housing, and it is in the city of Tunis where housing shortages were most acute and where the standard of living of the poorer Europeans most shocked contemporary writers. The Maltese quarters were often described as the most impoverished and poorly maintained of the city. Dumant wrote in 1858:

For the poor worker families, there are 'foudouks' ... whose inhabitants are mostly Maltese. ... These people are crammed 50 to 60 families together, and their children live all mixed up (pêler-dêlier) during the day surrounded by dirty and uncombed women.²⁵

The European quarter was located at the bottom of the sloping *medina* and thus was very wet and muddy throughout the rainy winter months. According to Guerin, the unpaved streets would become 'impassable

quagmires'. Water would stream down full of filth from the open sewers, leaving a terrible stench.²⁶ A more elaborate description is found in the minutes of the Sanitation Council of 1868, in which members complained particularly of the Maltese and Jewish quarters of the city.²⁷

Ganiage tends to recycle these observations of earlier writers, using colourful language of his own. He refers to the poor Europeans from Malta and Sicily as 'eminently unstable, difficult to evaluate, difficult to keep watch over'.²⁸ In explaining how immigrants could arrive without having forewarned relatives in the receiving countries, he states that there were hardly any problems of lodging in the overcrowded European quarter, for most families simply slept on straw, and many slept outside. The Maltese, he states, were the most miserable of all, and among them were those who had escaped the law using a false name, immigrants without any means of subsistence, and violent characters.²⁹ He describes where they lived: at the outskirts of the European quarter, which was expanding beyond the city walls; 'on vacant lots invaded by the refuge of the large city started to form a hideous suburb of huts and shacks, the Maltese quarter'.³⁰ Ganiage's characterizations of the Maltese, based on the primary sources described above, are in turn repeated in most recent works on the subject,³¹ leading to the development of a fairly homogenous tradition regarding the Tunisian-based Maltese.

The Maltese 'Golden Years', 1855-1870s

Europeans living in the Regency were under the protection and jurisdiction of their respective consulates. By the middle of the 19th century, some 14 nations had consular representatives in Tunis, including the long-established French and British consulates, those of primarily commercial interests such as Sardinia, Spain or Austria, and consuls of an honourific nature, like Belgium, or the United States.³² The Maltese, as British subjects, were under the protection of the British consulate.

Foreign consulates were reserved the right to judge in all criminal affairs involving their nationals, and in civil disputes between Europeans. It became the practise to defer all cases involving a foreign defendant against a Tunisian subject to the appropriate consular tribunal.³³ In addition, consulates were responsible for their subjects who for one reason or another found themselves in dire need. Because of the scarcity of charitable organizations at the time, many in dire need, including impoverished, sick or infirm individuals, were returned to Malta free of charge by British consular staff, ultimately at the expense of the Governor of Malta.

There were only a handful of settlers from England during this period. Others who sought British protection included some individuals from Greece or Gibraltar, and Jewish Maltese living in Tunisia. For this reason, the archives of the British consulate offices are really the best place to look for information on the Maltese: the Maltese were their primary concern and thus the subject of most letters, reports, trials and other materials that ended up in the archives of the Consulate.³⁸ A review of this material from the mid-1850s through the 1870s suggests that we revise our understanding of the Maltese in Tunisian history. During this period, many families had been established overseas for thirty years or more, leading to a sizable Tunisian-born portion of the population. This was also a period when the Maltese had a champion who held the highest position amongst the British consular staff, Consul General Richard Wood.³⁹ Wood's indefatigable efforts in tracking the matters of the poorest of his charges were remarkable, and it is clear that his model was either purposefully or unconsciously followed by the rest of his consular staff during his tenure in Tunis. Documents from this period move us beyond the rather dreary portraits of dirty shoeless children and unkempt women, and instead describe a people fairly well settled in their new home. While Maltese were periodically victims of crimes and certainly hardships, the documents suggest a population with considerable self-confidence or 'moxie'. The Maltese contacted both Tunisian and British authorities frequently and sometimes repeatedly to request help after a recent misfortune, or to demand justice in matters concerning other residents of Tunisia. Further, some areas of the Regency were practically under Maltese control, as will be outlined.

Because the archival record at this time provides little detail regarding the lives of the law-abiding working classes, it is necessary to turn to sources concerning those in trouble with various authorities. The records of the British consular court based in Tunis provide information not only on the crimes committed by certain individuals, but other aspects of Maltese daily life as well. A volume listing all police and civil cases brought before consular officials in Tunis in the 1870s has been studied in detail from 1875 through 1877.⁴⁰ The individuals, who were charged with offenses ranging from swearing to assault and murder, were almost entirely Maltese; a rare case involved British subjects from Gibraltar or Greece. These records list the occupations of the 'delinquents', and provide a very fine-grained description of the occupations of Maltese living in Tunis before the Protectorate.

Consular Court, 1875-1877

Occupations: Over the three year period surveyed, 1875-1877, the occupation of the 130 accused Maltese were, in order of decreasing importance: drivers of carriages, carts or coaches, 19.23%; small shopkeepers, 16.15%; day labourers and agriculturists, 15.38%; street vendors (fish and fruit sellers, wandering musicians and rag collectors), 13.84%; semi-skilled labour, 13.07%; vagrants or those with no jobs, 10%; waiters and / or tavern keepers, 9.23%; and other occupations, 3.07%.

The trade most occupied by Maltese offenders was driver of one kind or another; this finding confirms earlier observations noted above. Not always reported, however, is the wide range of Maltese semi-skilled labourers. In his parish records, Ganjage found a number of carpenters and blacksmiths; here, the trades listed are more diverse, and also include coopers, cart makers, masons, painters, and saddlers. The number and variety of small shopkeepers is also noteworthy. The high number of Maltese working as waiters, coffee shop owners and tavern keepers is corroborated by other documents. A list requested by the Bey in 1852 identified 59 such establishments run by Maltese in the cities of Tunis and La Goulette alone.⁴¹

Some Maltese (13) brought before consular authorities apparently had no occupation or were vagrants. These were almost exclusively the youngest male offenders (14 years old and so on) and included three women involved in disputes with other Maltese women. Given the rather dramatic descriptions of the Maltese quarters of the 1850s and 1860s, noted above, this small number of vagrants is surprising. Further, because most defined as such were young men in their late teens, often charged with 'riotous behaviour' by the local police, or with having insulted other individuals while drunk, these do not seem part of some larger group of professional vagrants and beggars, but rather unruly youths getting into trouble.

On the whole, therefore, these data do not suggest a miserably marginal subaltern mass, as we might predict from contemporary accounts, but instead indicate that the Maltese were a largely working population involved in a wide range of enterprises. There were many identified as independent shopkeepers and traders. Because these data are seriously 'skewed', in that they concern only Maltese criminals, we can only assume that the rest of the population was at least similar, if not more hardworking, and thus that the population as a whole was more involved in local commerce and trade than originally thought.

Crime and Punishment: Approximately two-thirds of the crimes listed in the Consulate records consisted of various kinds of assault: 'aggression', violent assault, stabbing, beating or 'wounding'. This was not a sedate population, or era. There were only three cases of homicide during the three-year period surveyed, however. At this time, Maltese convicted of first degree murder were given the death penalty, under British law, which may have been a deterrent.

Theft was also treated severely. Typically those found guilty of theft received a sentence of a year's hard labor in Malta and perpetual banishment from Tunisia. Thirteen of the 130 people brought to the Consulate office received this sentence, most for theft, and of these, six were only 'suspected' of having committed theft. A man accused of having stolen some clothes from his roommate received a six-month sentence, and another accused of robbing bananas and biting the hand of the gardener who tried to stop him was sentenced to two months.

Insulting others was a crime, and in these cases the accusers were predominantly Maltese. This suggests that only Maltese would find it worth their while to bring forward such a claim, although other interpretations are possible.⁴¹

The Victims: By looking more closely at the plaintiffs, typically the victims of the crimes here and identified by name, we can get a better sense of Maltese relationships with members of the other ethnic and religious groups of Tunis at that time. When incomplete records are eliminated from the sample, there are 131 crimes and sets of plaintiffs for the three-year period. Many of the plaintiffs were representatives of the Tunisian government, usually police or municipal officers: 22%. Approximately a third of these cases involved Maltese street vendors charged with breaking municipal rules, and who were either unable to pay the fines or who in turn insulted the arresting officer. Another third involved various kinds of complaints by local police of disorderly conduct, usually at night.

On 37 occasions, Maltese also attacked or insulted other Maltese: two-thirds of these victims were men and one-third women. These crimes ranged from insults and offensive expressions (11 cases), assault (16), and theft. But what is especially striking is the small number of victims of other European nationalities. Only one Englishman, one Greek and 4 Italians claimed to have been wronged by a Maltese. On the other hand, the number of Tunisian victims is very high: there were 66 cases altogether, or roughly half of the cases. Among these, a full third were Jewish and two thirds Muslim.

These figures are quite unlike those presented by Noured-dine regarding the criminal behaviour of Sicilians living in Sousse in the late 1880s.⁴² While Noured-dine's sample covers a slightly later period and another Tunisian city, his findings are so different as to suggest quite contrasting behavior. The vast majority of the victims of Sicilian criminals were of Italian origin (59%), and only 9% were Tunisians. For Maltese perpetrators in Tunis, the figures are nearly reversed, with some 25% involving other Maltese and over 65% involving Tunisians. It could be inferred from this contrast that the Maltese were in closer contact with the local population than at least Sicilians and thus were more likely to get into disputes with them.

If we examine in greater detail the problem of Maltese crimes against Tunisians, proximately seems at least partly involved. Approximately half of the cases involved various kinds of assault. When the records indicate that the Maltese were accused of both drunkenness and aggression, one could imagine that the incident was the result of some general rumble in a bar or on the way home from one (for example: 'charged with having in a state of drunkenness . . . assaulted several individuals, and severely hurting X, who lost his cap in the affray'). The cases in which Tunisians were hit by chairs, for example, suggests that the victims and aggressors were at least sitting in the same place before the attack. It is hard to know what percentage of these cases were motivated by the religious or ethnic differences of the victims, or by religious tensions, however, or how seriously the victims were injured. Maltese were accused of blasphemy, a serious crime at the time, suggesting some tensions of this sort.⁴³ The high number of Tunisian Jews attacked suggests a real anti-Jewish sentiment. More research is needed to elucidate the role of urban geography (the Maltese and Jewish quarters overlapped), and that of the workings of the consulate offices. We do not know, for example, if disgruntled Tunisians would be more likely to find satisfaction bringing forward a complaint at the British consulate than, for example, the French one. Finally, it should be noted that during this time the British Consulate was one of the few still located within the medina walls, which may have made it a favourite place to end late-night squabbles.

Daily Concerns of the Humble Classes

Another source for understanding the lives of Maltese during the decades immediately preceding the Protectorate are letters written by British Consular agents to Tunisian Prime Ministers, found in the National Archives in Tunis.⁴⁴ While much of this correspondence concerns administrative matters,

like changes in export taxes, a large percentage of the letters concern individual Maltese either in trouble with Tunisian authorities, or Maltese who had contacted Consul General Wood to rectify what they perceived as some wrong committed by Tunisian laws, Tunisian officials, or subjects. These letters give one the sense of the degree to which the Maltese had made a home for themselves in Tunisia, and the degree to which they felt comfortable among the Tunisian population itself.

A significant portion of the letters concerned Maltese traders and property disputes from throughout the Regency. However, what is most surprising about this correspondence is the number of letters concerning the poorer of the Consul's charges. These letters are doubly interesting: their tone demonstrates a high degree of sympathy from Wood towards even the humblest of the Maltese, and their subject provides valuable detail about the occupations and preoccupations of the Maltese then living in the Regency.

From this correspondence, we learn that Maltese living outside Tunis in areas like Sousse and Sfax were also shepherds. In 1872, the Tunisian Prime Minister informed Wood that Maltese were pasturing their sheep in the olive orchards of Tunisian subjects. The next year two Maltese men living in Sfax complained of the theft of 97 sheep by a pair of Tunisian brothers.⁴⁹ Maltese were also agriculturists.⁵⁰ Taxes on harvests were significant, and several letters refer to the Prime Minister's complaints about Maltese farmers or landowners who still owed money to the state. In 1878, there were so many Maltese proprietors in Sousse and Monastir who had not paid taxes on their olive trees that the amount due reached 10,761 piastres.⁵¹ The next year a list of British subjects of Monastir and Mahdiah who owed tithes on their crops was prepared by the president of the Finance Commission.⁵²

These letters indicate the close proximity within which Tunisians and Maltese lived, even in the more remote corners of the Regency. Along with the comingling of sheep and orchards, we learn from a subsequent dispute that a Maltese man promised to build a cactus hedge for a Tunisian to divide their properties.⁵³ A herd of goats was owned jointly by a Maltese and a Tunisian. This information reached us after the British Consul was asked to step in and settle a squabble between goat herders.⁵⁴

A group of amusing letters attest to the degree of comfort some Maltese and Tunisians felt in requesting that authorities intervene in what by today's standards would seem like very minor matters. A Tunisian in Sfax complained about a British subject who was bothering him while fishing; this complaint was forwarded onto the Prime Minister.⁵⁵ In turn,

a Maltese fisherman of Sousse complained of the theft of his fishing net; this matter was thoroughly examined by the British consular agent in Sousse, leading to a lengthy correspondence to Consul General Wood and between Wood and the Prime Minister. According to the investigation, half of the net in question was found in the possession of a Tunisian fisherman who claimed to have purchased it from a Sicilian fisherman. As it turned out, the Tunisian could not remember the name of the Sicilian, and the affair was submitted to the Khalifa of Monastir, who forwarded it on to the Khalifa of Sousse, who let it drop. Wood pursued the matter, however, writing to the Prime Minister that he found it highly unlikely that the Tunisian 'purchased the net from a fisherman he hardly knows', and thought it far more likely that the 'Tunisian is either in cahoots with the robber or is the robber himself'.⁵⁶

While it may seem remarkable that the time and efforts of so many local notables and government officials, including the Prime Minister, would be dedicated to such matters, it is also surprising that the British Consul General would continue to pursue them. The most striking case of this kind is that which occurred in the region of Sousse in 1874 concerning a case of a stolen mule. Maltese resident Lorenzo Mifsud claimed that his mule had been stolen some 18 months prior, and was now in the possession of a Tunisian. A thorough investigation was conducted. The consular agent reported to Wood that the Tunisian presented him with a petition signed by 35 people stating that the animal had been in his possession for six years, 'whilst the Maltese could only produce that of some 16 witnesses, mostly Maltese, and the matter had the appearance on that account of going against him'. The Maltese explained to the consular agent 'that the animal was not so well-known here as at Enfidra, where the animal was reared'. The consular agent, after 'considerable trouble' gaining the approval of the local Khalifa, sent the mule to Enfidra under a guarantee of 500 Piastres, and the Maltese returned with a petition signed 'by an immense number of the people of Enfidra' who recognised the mule and declared it his. However, in reviewing the statements collected, the consular agent found a discrepancy regarding the mule's description: 'in the document possessed by the Moor, the colour is described as black or bordering on black, whilst in that of the Maltese it is given as "Kharabi" or brown bordering on black, which I conceive as its true colour.' This affair was completed, to our amazement today, with the consular agent and the Khalifa determining together that the 'matter can only find a solution at Tunis', and the two litigants together with the mule accordingly proceeded to that place.⁵⁷

Consular agents outside Tunis also had to cope with a large number of complaints about Maltese disturbing the peace. Some are linked to some Maltese individuals' association with alcohol or vice. For example, Maltese were attacked in Monastir for playing loud music,⁵² and a woman there was accused of keeping a 'disorderly house'.⁵³ At times, some Maltese apparently were fearless, and went as far as to threaten or attack Tunisian policeman or night watchmen.⁵⁴ A complaint was made by the Bey himself in 1871 about Maltese men wandering 'about the beach in the Island of Djerba, threatening the Guards at night'.⁵⁵ Incidents such as these lead us to a final important subject linked to the Maltese of this era, contraband.

Contraband and the Maltese

During the nineteenth century, there was a great imbalance in local import and export taxes. Taxes of products imported into the Regency from Europe were fixed at a very low rate of 3%; when the Tunisian government wanted to increase revenue, it often raised export tariffs. Taxes on some products reached as high as 25% or even 50%. In addition, export regulations were complex. Export permits had to be purchased from the Bey. Merchants often obtained these permits before purchasing the products to be exported, but if circumstances prevented them from setting out right away with their merchandise, they risked leaving with an invalid permit and were required to obtain a second document, the *contrabon*. A special permission was also required for the importation of wine, liquor and spirits.⁵⁶

Due to these complex rules and high export duties, it is not surprising that there was an active contraband trade. Raw materials like oils, hides and grains were exported illegally from the Sahel to coastal towns and onto Malta, or overland to Algeria.⁵⁷ Contraband was easily loaded onto small fishing boats on remote corners of the beach at night, and it is perhaps no coincidence that there were noteworthy Maltese communities all along the Tunisian coast, in Mahdia, Sfax, Sousse, and Djerba. Rather than being a source of revenue, the contraband trade was a source of trouble. Rather than being a source of revenue, the contraband trade was a source of trouble. Rather than being a source of revenue, the contraband trade was a source of trouble. Rather than being a source of revenue, the contraband trade was a source of trouble.

An almost open contraband trade in oils was conducted along the beach near Mahdia in the 1850s, for example. Disputes between the predominantly Maltese Christian population and local officials and notables grew to a point that a collective inquiry was held in 1858.⁵⁸ The local Cheikh stated that Maltese were repeatedly caught unloading casks of oil. They often numbered thirty men or more, and would attack and

injure the local guards who tried to arrest them. While these accusations were soundly refuted by the local Maltese questioned, the British Vice Consul who conducted the inquiry does admit in his report that the contraband trade in Mahdia was almost entirely under Maltese control.

Maltese were so involved in contraband that by the 1870s there were Maltese boats and vessels lying for years in most Tunisian ports to be used as 'floating Depots for contraband'.⁵⁹ Many possessed along with the British flag those of Jerusalem, Tunis and Turkey, 'which they display at the various Ports and creeks they visit according to local circumstances.' Efforts to slow this activity were unsuccessful, and Wood wrote to his staff in 1871 that any vessel navigating without regular papers can be treated automatically as 'piratical'.

British officials dealt relatively severely with Maltese accused of dealing in the contraband of arms, gunpowder, and even Tunisian military uniforms,⁶⁰ some of which found their way to various individuals or groups in Algeria. British agents were less concerned about the traffic in substances controlled by state monopolies, like tobacco, which was viewed as a logical outcome of government regulations. Writing to the Bey regarding Maltese involved in the illegal tobacco trade, Wood notes

convinced from long experience of the impossibility of preventing the importation of Tobacco in Contraband, I have occasionally suggested some alteration in the Importation and Sale of Tobacco, advantageous both to the public Revenue and to the Public; and I am afraid that so long as those suggestions are not carried out, the Evil complained of will continue.⁶¹

Perhaps aware of this attitude of the highest member of the British consular staff, Maltese carried out an almost open battle with Tobacco Department officials for decades. Over and over again they would attack officials when searched or when asked to turn over their contraband.⁶² At other times, the agents of the Tobacco department were clearly over-zealous in carrying out their duties, and complaints by Maltese of vandalism and violence also were numerous.⁶³

Maltese/Tunisian Relationships

New information gleaned from British consular records indicates that there was a great deal of interaction between Maltese and Tunisians during this time. They socialized or worked together at many different levels, sharing herds of goats, or walking along with fellow cartmen after work. Maltese and Tunisians fished in the same areas. While parts of

Tunisia were not viewed as particularly safe for Europeans, it is clear that some Maltese felt quite comfortable in the countryside, and even at night: they were often found wandering around beaches of then remote towns like Monastir or Sfax, slipping out in the medina of Tunis after dark, or playing loud music after hours; this is not the behaviour of a people either feeling particularly unsafe or who were trying to quietly blend in. We may not conclude that we are dealing with a perfectly obedient populace, but at least we are moving beyond the depressing portraits described above.

While their identification by outside observers as an 'intermediary' population may have been partly based on their speaking a language similar to that spoken in Tunisia, this ability to communicate with the local population granted the Maltese some real advantages, including the ability to forge upon arrival new partnerships and international trading networks, for example, not the least of which included an active contraband trade. One could argue in fact that for the Maltese smugglers, an ability to serve as bridge between Occident and Orient was a prerequisite. Smugglers needed to be able to develop a network of trading partners in Tunisia as well as in Malta, or in some cases Algeria: Tunisians merchants were needed to sell them the olive oil, hides and other raw materials they would take to Europeans elsewhere, and to purchase from them their European products like tobacco, spirits, gunpowder and so forth. European traders—Maltese, Italians, British, or French—were needed to purchase the contraband coming from Tunisia, and as providers of European-made goods for illegal export.

Vadala writes in 1911 that despite the fact that Maltese were hated by Muslims during the 18th century for their religious beliefs (or, perhaps for their activities as Pirates of St. John), as soon as piracy was abolished, 'the Tunisians saw them as half-brothers and used their services as intermediaries with the peoples of Europe'. He adds that the role of the Maltese in North Africa 'has not yet been sufficiently highlighted, and it is time to set the record straight'.⁶⁷

Abbreviations

NAT	National Archives of Tunisia, Tunis
PRO	Public Record Office, London, U.K.
FO	Foreign Office records
CO	Colonial Office records
PM	Prime Minister

Notes

1. Diplomatic intrigues were in fact even more complex, for the two main European powers with interests in Tunisia, France and Great Britain, were locked in a state of competition and mutual suspicion, and each had different relationships with the Ottoman Empire. Crudely, the French were anti-Turkish and the British pro, but these orientations in turn were motivated by a desire to thwart the ambitions of the other: The British, for example, felt that Tunis would stay out of French control only if ties to Turkey were maintained. See L. Carl Brown, *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey, 1837-1855* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1974) and Jean Ganiage, *Les origines du protectorat français en Tunisie, 1861-1881* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
2. By the end of the 18th century, there were 252 'free' Christians and 1,000 to 2,000 Christian slaves. These slaves worked for the Bey, the court, and the city of Tunis. See R. P. Anselme des Arcs *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Mission des Captifs dans la Régence de Tunis, 1624-1865* (Rome: Archives Générales de l'Ordre des Capucins, 1889), 86-87, and Lucette Valenti, 'Esclaves chrétiens et esclaves noirs à Tunis au XVIII^e siècle,' *Annales* 22, no. 4-6 (1967): 1267-1288.
3. Sources often claim that the abolition of Christian slavery led to increased stability in the region. What is not stated, however, is that many of these changes may in turn have been prompted by the departure of the Order of St. John from Malta in 1798. This order had been carrying out officially sanctioned piracy of Muslim vessels and enslavement of Muslims in Malta for centuries. Through the end of the 18th century, Maltese pirates regularly raided vessels along the Tunisian coast, bringing back the booty and especially the captives to Malta. These raids were not only carried out at sea, but sometimes at Tunisian seaport towns. See Jacques Godechot, 'La course maltaise le long des côtes barbaresques à la fin du XVIII^e siècle,' *Revue Africaine* (1952): 105-113.
4. Epidemics of 1813 and 1837 decimated large numbers of the population and hindered trade through the imposition of quarantine restrictions; cotton production, until 1800 the island's second major source of income was hit by both Spanish import restrictions in 1800 and competition from Egypt; and a major drought of 1840-1841 encouraged the flight of already impoverished farmers. According to the 1842 census, there were 112,500 Maltese and 5,000 foreigners at that time, or a population density of some 371.83/km². For an excellent study of this Maltese emigration phenomenon, see Charles Price, *Malta and the Maltese: A Study in Nineteenth century Migration* (Melbourne, Australia: Georgian House, 1954).
5. Price, 61.
6. Foreign Office (FO) 339/98, Public Record Office (PRO), 1875.
7. Price, 189.
8. There were so few Maltese in the U.S. that when proportional immigration quotas were established in 1921 based on the number already settled by 1910, the Maltese quota was set at 14 per year. Price, *Malta and the Maltese*, 195.

9. Lucette Valenti, 'Calamités démographiques en Tunisie et en Méditerranée orientale aux XVIII et XIX^e siècles', *Annales* 24, no. 5-6 (1969): 1540-1561.
10. Price, 51.
11. 29 September 1853, Baynes to Earl Clarendon, Colonial Office (CO) 158/168, PRO.
12. 25 February 1858, Wood to Mohammed Bey, 204/57/6, National Archives, Tunis (NAT); 15 April 1876, Wood to Prime Minister, 204/57/6, NAT.
13. Jean Ganiage, *La population européenne de Tunis au milieu du XIX^e siècle. Etude démographique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960).
14. Ganiage 1960: 19.
15. Ganiage 1960: footnote, 19.
16. Italy would not be formed until 1861. Before that time, individuals are listed in the sources as 'Neapolitan' or 'Sicilian', and so on. For the sake of simplicity, individuals from these various origins will be considered together here as 'Italians'.
17. In Sfax, for example, they would comprise 77% of the Catholic population between 1841 and 1879 and would number 900 out of a total of 1200 in 1885. Pierre Soumilla, 'Petite étude retrospective sur l'histoire de la paroisse Catholique de Sfax,' unpublished manuscript.
18. François Bourmand, *Tunisie et Tunisiens* (Paris: J. Lefort, 1893), 159.
19. J. Henry Dunant, *Notice sur la Régence de Tunis* (Geneve: Jules Fick, 1858), 254.
20. Gabriel Chamma, *La Tunisie et la Tripolitaine*, (Paris: Calmann Lévy Chamma, 1888), 29, 31.
21. Narcisse Faucon, *La Tunisie avant et depuis l'occupation française. Histoire et colonisation*, vol. II, Colonisation. (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1893), 301.
22. E. Pellissier, *Description de la Régence de Tunis* (Tunis: Editions Bouahma, 1858), 51.
23. A. de Flaux, *La Régence de Tunis au dix-neuvième siècle*. (Paris: Challamel Aurié, 1865), 56.
24. Dunant, 259.
25. Dunant, 43. It should be noted that he describes the rest of the city more positively.
26. V. Guerin, *Voyage archéologique dans la Régence de Tunis* (Paris: Hainé Ron, 1862), 15.
27. April 15, 1868, CO 158/217, PRO.
28. Ganiage 1960: 19.
29. Ganiage 1960: 28.
30. Ganiage 1960: 30.
31. See for example, Carmel Sammut, 'La minorité italienne de Tunisie: Eléments arabes ou européens? Actes du premier congrès international de l'étude des cultures méditerranéennes d'influence arabo-berbère (Alger: SNFD, 1972): 486-513.
32. Ganiage 1960: 41.
33. Ganiage 1960: 23; see also Brown, *The Tunisia of Ahmed Bey*, 246.
34. Most of this material is stored at the Public Record Office, London. The Tunisian National Archives in Tunis contains letters received from British Consulate officers from 1781 to 1883.
35. Richard Wood was British Consul General in Tunis from 1855 to 1879. He was born in Larahul, worked there first as Dragoon, and then was promoted to Consul General in Damascus before moving on to Tunis.

36. FO339/119, Miscellaneous Series, Tunisia, Consulate and Embassy Archives, PRO.
37. In developing these statistics, I first prepared a list of each case and the accused individuals, and then searched through to eliminate repeat offenders in order to avoid the repetition of their occupation in the total. After this process, 34 occupations were identified for the 130 different Maltese individuals brought to consular officials. Similar occupations were grouped together as explained below.
38. Small shopkeepers is a category created by combining the following: barber, 1; baker, 1; butcher, 2; confectioner, 1; shoemaker, 7; trader, 5; tailor, 2; shoemaker, 1; miller, 1.
39. Semi-skilled labour is again a modern category created by combining the following occupations: carpenter, blacksmith, cart builder, cooper, mason, painter, saddler.
40. 2 July 1832, Baynes to Ahmed Bey, 58/638, item 70087, NAT.
41. These often resulted from alterations between family members or regular acquaintances, and the Consular Court records are sometimes so detailed as to suggest that the accusers took pleasure in outlining the others' offenses.
42. Ali Nouridine, 'Criminalité sicilienne et justice française au Sabel (1888-1898),' Paper presented at the conference 'La Tunisie et ses Etrangers', Faculté des Sciences Humaines et Sociales, Université de Tunis, Tunisia, November 1996.
43. There were 5 accusations of blasphemy during the three-year period, including twice by the guard of the British consulate. These latter cases led to sentences of three to four weeks in prison.
44. Letters found in section H, 'Historique,' Cartons 227 and 228, Files 411 to 414, 1850 to 1883, National Archives, Tunis.
45. 17 October 1873, Wood no. 232 to Sidé Moustafa, PM, 228/413, NAT.
46. Maltese were the first Europeans to be able to own land legally following an agreement made in 1863 between Wood and the Bey.
47. 10 February 1871, Wood to Kherredin, PM, 228/413, NA Tunis; 26 February 1878, Wood no. 61 to General Si Mohamed, PM, 228/414, NA Tunis; 3 March 1878, Dupuis no. 3 to Wood, Consul General, Tunis, 228/414, NAT; and 22 March 1878, Wood no. 80 to General Si Mohamed, PM, 228/414, NAT.
48. 19 August 1878, Wood no. 258 to General Si Mohamed, Prime Minister, 228/414, NAT.
49. 23 March 1872, Wood no. 104 to Sidé Moustafa, PM, 228/413, NAT.
50. 12 February 1875, Wood no. 54 to Kherredin, PM, 228/413, NAT.
51. 13 April 1874, Wood no. 100 to Kherredin, PM, 228/413, NAT.
52. 17 January 1877, Wood no. 13 to Kherredin, PM, 228/414, NAT.
53. 2 April 1874, H. Lewis Dupuis no. 12 to Wood, 228/413, NAT.
54. 16 August 1872, Wood no. 253 to Bey, 228/413, NAT.
55. 29 March 1878, Wood no. 88 to PM, 228/414, NAT.
56. 6 September 1871, Wood no. 278 to PM, 228/413, NAT.
57. 22 March 1871, Wood to Mohammed Bey, 228/413, NAT.
58. Louis Frank, 'Tunis, Description de Cote Regence', *Algerie, Etats Tripolitains, Tunis*, (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1885), 83.