The development of domestic space in the Maltese Islands from the Late Middle Ages to the second half of the Twentieth Century

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Chapter 2

THE MALTESE ISLANDS: SOCIETY, CLASS, ECONOMY AND SETTLEMENTS

"*The typical labyrinthine network of narrow roads and alleys forms such a charming feature of today's Maltese village.*"
(Jaccarini 2002: 16)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a historical outline of the Maltese islands and uses the historical evidence to study the local class structure and how class evolved during the period under review. More specifically it considers a relatively wide period ranging from the Muslim phase in AD 870 to the emergence of Malta's statehood in 1964. This study focuses, in particular, on the social and economic development of these islands without, however, ignoring the islands' political set-up and the various contacts they had with the outside world. To acquire a more comprehensive picture, this chapter makes use of all the available data, including geographical, archaeological, cartographic and statistical, to explore settlement evolution in the Maltese islands within a socio-historical perspective. The understanding of the societal and economic changes that took place in the Maltese islands during the period under study creates the framework within which one can examine and interpret the evolution of the Maltese houses. Similarly, an understanding of Malta's settlement structure from a long-term perspective is a crucial prerequisite for a thorough research into the Maltese houses.

2.2 The Medieval Period

This period spans from the Byzantine phase in the 6th century AD to the arrival of the Order of St. John in 1530. It is a relatively turbulent period characterized historically by several invasions, sovereignty disputes and by authoritarian governments. In 870 the Maltese islands fell under Muslim domination, while in 1091 they became part of the Norman dominion together with Sicily and South Italy. Subsequently, they came to form part of the Hohenstaufen possessions (1194), then falling for a short period under Angevin rule (1266). From 1282 onwards they began to form part of the Spanish *Regio Demanio* (Demesnes). In 1530 Charles V of Spain donated these islands to the Knights of St. John after the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman I had expelled them from Rhodes in 1523, following a long military conflict.

The Medieval period is a time during which all political decisions concerning the Maltese islands, their people and possessions were dictated by foreign rulers, many times to safeguard their own political, financial and economic interests. There were also

occasions when these islands were exchanged with other lands and possessions in Europe or the Mediterranean or else were donated as wedding gifts to seal political ties between rival ruling families (Dalli 2006: 118-20; 155). The interests of foreign powers in these islands were protected by a group of royal representatives who were empowered to take important decisions on behalf of their sovereign, for example tax collection and the administration of the local castles (Dalli 2006: 195-98).

2.2.1 Political development

The Maltese islands were integrated into *Dar al-Islam* (meaning, the 'house of Islam' to signify the Muslim regions of the world) in 870 after almost three centuries of Byzantine occupation. According to the Arab writer Al-Himyari, the Byzantine garrison offered resistance to the invaders, but the latter succeeded to overcome the enemy and to raze to the ground the island's fortress (from this account it is unclear whether the author refers here to the medieval town of Mdina or else to a separate defensive system, see point (c) below).

Al-Himyari also states that after the Arab conquest, these islands remained uninhabited for almost two centuries. Until its repopulation with new settlers, the author tells us, Malta remained a ruin (*hirba*), although it was visited by foreign shipbuilders, fishermen and honey collectors. In 1048 the Byzantines attempted to bring Malta again under their control, but failed to overthrow the local garrison. During the Islamic phase Malta and Gozo formed part of the emirate of Sicily (Blouet 1993: 36; De Lucca 1995: 19). It is unclear what happened to the natives of the islands when these fell under Islamic rule; it is possible that many escaped, others were taken into slavery or killed, while others survived to work the land.

There are several points that emerge from Al-Himyari's account that need to be pointed out:

a) the islands seem to have been left practically uninhabited for many years following their Islamic invasion. This statement can be rather exaggerated because, on the basis of what occurred in other parts of the Islamic world during this period, it would have been unwise for the new conquerors to fail to make use of their newly acquired foothold;
b) the presence of foreign shipbuilders, fishermen and honey collectors, who visited the islands, presumably from Sicily, North Africa or both, to exploit specific natural resources (wood, fish and honey) may indicate a phase of proto-colonization and perhaps also temporary habitation, for example when these visitors found shelter here due to bad weather. The fact that Al-Himyari's narrative indicates that Malta was repopulated in the first half of the 11th century implies that its permanent colonization occurred at a relatively late phase, as happened in certain parts of Sicily, which similarly fell under Islamic rule (Dalli 2006: 58);
c) this account refers to the dismantling of a fortress. Al-Himyari's distinction between a fortress (*hisn*) and a city (*madina*) and the re-establishment of the latter by the Arabs some time before 1048, when a Byzantine attack on the

island was imminent, suggest that in Malta there was not yet a Muslim-controlled citadel between 870 and the first half of the 11th century (Dalli 2006: 58-59). The medieval writer does not specify the location of the fortress and the city; while the archaeological evidence has located the Islamic *madina* in the centre of Malta, where modern Mdina today stands, the location of the fortress has so far remained an enigma;

d) the apparent repopulation of Mdina in the late 10th or early 11th century tallies with the local archaeological evidence (Dalli 2006: 60-61), because the earliest material culture found in Mdina datable to the Islamic phase has been ascribed to this particular time. Archaeological explorations conducted in Mdina and the Gozo Citadel indicate that by this period the urban centres of these islands had become permanent settlements.

The above observations demonstrate that, although these islands became part of the Muslim world in the second half of the 9th century, the picture that emerges on the local political institutions occupies the last part of the Islamic phase.

The local government was presumably similar to that which prevailed elsewhere in the Muslim world (Boone and Benco 1999: 62-63). The islands were probably administered by a group of officials (known as the *ġemgħa*) led by the local *qaid* (regional lord), who had important judicial and administrative functions (Lapidus 1967: 111). Other senior officials of the local administration may have included a *qadi* (judge in religious matters), a *ħakim* (judge in civil matters), and a military commander. It is unclear whether there was a central government for the two islands or whether these had a separate administration. The degree of authority which the *muħtara* (from an old local surname Muħtar or Muħtara, which means a village headmen) potentially had during this phase is unknown; they possibly had certain administrative functions and represented their villagers in the *ġemgħa*. Evidence for this system of government comes mainly from Maltese toponomy and anthroponomy, where some of the earliest place-names and family names, undoubtedly of Semitic origin, refer particularly to these administrative titles, for example Għajn Qajjied (in the west of Rabat, meaning the spring of the commander), Dejr l-Imara (in south east of Malta, meaning the sheepfold of the commanders), and Għajn Qadi (in the parish of Siġġiewi, meaning the spring of the judge). That these place-names occur only in Malta favours the hypothesis that during this time these islands were characterized by a central system of government. However, the family name Muħtar may indicate some form of administrative organization at a village level as occurred elsewhere in the Islamic Mediterranean (Lapidus 1967: 85-90; Boone and Benco 1999: 64).

The islands' political scenario changed from the 12th century onwards when they came under the domination of different European rulers. Comparable to what occurred in Sicily and elsewhere on the Continent (Epstein 2002: 132; Sanchez Leon 2003: 276), the islands became royal property and were frequently enfeoffed to Sicilian, Italian or Spanish aristocratic magnates who were bound to provide the Crown with regular military and financial support (Cini 2003: 39-40). By the 15th century there were more than thirty fiefs spread in different parts of the island, particularly in the Rabat area (Wettinger 1982: 4-6). The enfeoffed estates were cultivated by peasants and slaves.

According to historical records it was not before the late 13th century that the Maltese were granted some form of self-government, which became more influential and powerful in the following century. The establishment of two separate municipal councils, one in Malta and the other in Gozo, known as *universitas*, signified that several decisions concerning home matters, such as public health, the restoration and maintenance of the castle walls and the administration of the markets, could be taken at a local level (Blouet 1993: 45). The two main medieval urban centres, Mdina and the Gozo Castello, were the seat of the two town councils, respectively. The organization of these town councils was modelled on that of Sicily (Epstein 2002: 52-53; Scicluna 2008: 1). The members were elected from the fellow townsmen and villagers and their office was tenable for one year (Dalli 2006: 243). Occasionally, a general assembly was convened, for which even the village representatives were invited to participate. Apart from its daily administration, the Mdina town council was also responsible for the administration of justice, imposing fines for minor offences and the death penalty for more serious crimes. It imposed taxes on specific products, for example on the importation of wine, and issued trade permits (Dalli 2006: 190, 217-18). Its revenues were accrued from various sources and were mainly used for the importation of tax free grain from Sicily (*tratte*), for public works and the restoration of the town walls, for the procurement of weapons and for the salaries of the council officials (Fiorini 1993a: 131-33). In the Grand Harbour the inhabitants of Birgu fell under the jurisdiction of the Castellan, who was responsible for the upkeep of and to garrison the nearby medieval *Castrum Maris* (Figure 2.1).

All the council officials had specific responsibilities; for example, the royal captain (*ħakem* or *capitano della verga*) was the most senior member of the *università*. He was responsible for chairing council meetings, for the defence of the town and the island and for keeping peace in the country. The *accattapani* were responsible for fixing market prices and for public health, while the *supra marammerius* supervised the upkeep of the town walls and the cleaning of its ditch. The municipal body of Mdina ran a small public hospital, controlled the prisons, and organized the local garrison and the manning of watch posts (Dalli 2011: 76). Also forming part of this council were the physician, the schoolmaster, the pharmacist and the notary. The Gozo *università* seems to have been organized in a similar way. The ranks within both town councils were normally occupied by the highest echelons of society, namely the urban nobility, legal experts and practitioners, as well as influential entrepreneurs (Dalli 2006: 218-19).

Another important institution in the country was the Church. While the *universitas* had civic jurisdiction over the country, the Church was responsible for the organization of its parishes, for the administration of its properties and collection of taxes, and for the pastoral well-being of the Catholic community (Scicluna 2008: 26; Vassallo 2008: 43). Twelfth-century documents refer to a local diocese which was a suffragan of Palermo (Blouet 1993: 40). The bishops of Malta normally did not reside in Malta, although they had a palace in Mdina (Fiorini 1993a: 135-36). Apart from the Cathedral canons and the diocesan clergy, there were also the religious orders which were established from the second half of the 14th century onwards in Mdina, Rabat and Birgu (Dalli 2006: 228-29).

In times of peril the three main castles of the islands (Mdina, Birgu and the Gozo Castello) sheltered most of the local population behind their walls, for example when the islands were raided by North African corsairs in 1424 and 1429 (Dalli 2006: 212, 238) (Figure 2.1).

The walls of the castles, coastal towers and public order were maintained by the local militia, members of which were conscripted from practically all the towns and villages; males aged between sixteen and sixty-five were liable for military service (Blouet 1993: 44). Historical records show that this untrained militia, composed mostly of peasant farmers, was not strong enough to withstand a prolonged siege. However, it was organized to detect approaching enemy ships and to give enough time for the inhabitants to seek refuge in the walled towns or in some other remote areas.

The available sources do not help us much to determine precise population figures. However, from certain documents it is possible to get a snapshot of how the local population may have fluctuated over a period of approximately six hundred years. For instance, on the basis of a mid-thirteenth-century report, Blouet (1993: 40) estimates a native population of approximately 5,000 people, with Malta being more populated than Gozo by a ratio of about 5:1. This is the earliest population figure that can be obtained for medieval Malta. Subsequently, the militia lists of 1419 led Fiorini (1993a: 114-15) to estimate a native population of about 8,300 souls, which seemingly increased to around 9,000 by the late 15th century. When the Knights arrived in Malta in 1530, the local population was only about 17,000 people (Cassar 1997: 141). These estimates, therefore, suggest a general demographic rise between the mid-13th and the late 15th century, followed by another sharp increase towards 1530.

However between the mid-13th and the late 14th century there were several events which caused a demographic decline in Malta and Gozo. Apart from cases of bad harvest, famine and disease, the islands also suffered frequent pirate and enemy attacks, some of which were so fierce that many inhabitants were killed or ended up in slavery (Luttrell 1975b: 62; Blouet 1993: 44). Further sudden depopulation was registered in 1250, when the Muslims were expelled from the Kingdom of Sicily, including Malta, and then again in 1492 when the local Jewish community, like that of Sicily, was ordered to leave the country (Fiorini 1993a: 114-15; Epstein 2002: 337). Therefore, although the above figures suggest a general demographic rise, there were moments in which the islands also experienced a population decline, particularly between 1250 and 1390. The 1419 estimate may indicate that the local population was possibly recovering from the decline of the previous century.

Putting the above figures and assumptions within a European context it seems that the Maltese islands probably experienced the same general demographic changes that occurred elsewhere in the Continent (Epstein 1991: 17; 2002: 340). In fact, countries like Italy and Sicily are both characterized by a general population decline during the 14th century as a result of the Black Death, bad harvests, famine and warfare, followed by a population recovery during the first half of the 15th century. In Sicily, for example, population recovery was registered towards the mid-15th century (Epstein 2002: 198).

2.2.2 The social organization, class structure and the quality of life

During the Middle Ages the local social organization was influenced by different cultural currents as a result of the islands' long time occupation by foreign dominations. Since during this period the islands fell under the direct political control of the Sicilian emirate and then of the Kingdom of Sicily (from the Norman period onwards), the social patterns that emerge locally are often similar to those of Sicily and South Italy.

The available historical sources do not provide a complete picture of the local society during the Islamic occupation. However, there are indications that the indigenous society and class structure that developed in Malta between the late 10th and the early 12th centuries were similar to those of Islamic Sicily. Some of the local place-names and family names which survived in late medieval documents suggest that the native social hierarchy was vertically divided into different levels: from the ruling elite and notables (the *qaid*, the *qadi* and the *ħakim*) at the top, those who possibly had some type of civic responsibility at village level (the *muħtar*), the urban craftspeople and labourers, as well as the peasantry, the urban poor and the *għabid* (or slaves) at the very bottom of the social ladder. As occurred elsewhere in the Islamic world, the local social organization could have been much more complex however there is so far no historical evidence (Lapidus 1967: 46-50, 79-85). For example, no reference to Islamic sufis, tax collectors or scribes has survived in our records.

In the Islamic world, the ruling elite and notables were associated with urban society and usually possessed extensive stretches of land (Boone and Benco 1999: 62-63). In Malta they probably lived in the town (*madina*), from where they ruled the country, administered justice, and also lived comfortably. Their role as wealthy landowners is confirmed by the local toponomy (Wettinger 2000). For example, place-names like Għajn Qajjed (meaning, the spring of the commander), Tal-Qajjed (meaning, the lands of the commander), Tal-Qadi and Ħal Qadi (meaning, the lands or the village of the judge) suggest that the local *qaid* and *qadi* possessed stretches of land just outside the town as well as further beyond. Since there is no evidence that Gozo had a separate government and no place-names refer specifically to the Islamic elite, it is possible that this island was administered by a representative of the *qaid*.

The discovery of late tenth- and early eleventh-century imported Islamic pottery in Mdina, in the Gozo Citadel and in certain rural areas suggests regular trading contacts with North Africa and Sicily and possibly also the presence of a group of local and/or foreign merchants, who in Islamic times also formed part of the elite urban society (Lapidus 1967: 46-50; Dalli 2006: 60). Like any other urban community, the Mdina residents certainly needed the services of shopkeepers, artisans and other labourers, besides a local garrison to defend the town and the island. De Lucca (1995: 33) maintains that the town market was possibly situated within the town walls, not far away from its centre. The lowest social class consisted of slaves (*għabid*), who were usually captured during wars. Evidence for slavery during this phase comes once again from Al-Himyari's text and from several local place-names, for example Wied il-Għabid (meaning, the valley of the slaves) and Qalgħet il-Għabid (meaning, the inlet of the slaves). Certain other toponyms, for instance Bir Għulem (meaning, the well of the young slave) and Wied il-Għulem (meaning, the valley of the young slave), point to the

presence of young male slaves. The manumission of slaves seems to have been practised as elsewhere in the Islamic world. This is evidenced by a number of place-names that include the term *għatiq* (emancipated slave) as well as by Al-Himyari, who specifically makes reference to these slaves (Brincat 1995: 20). The slaves were used in households or to work the elite's estates.

Although no villages datable to the early Islamic phase have been discovered so far, the existence of some form of rural habitation in Malta is documented by the presence of Islamic phase pottery, datable to the late 10th and early 11th centuries, which has been identified in areas like Ta' Ċieda (in the parish of San Ġwann), Tas-Silġ (in the parish of Marsaxlokk), and Ġnien is-Sultan (in the parish of Rabat) (Dalli 2006: 60-61). This evidence suggests that, contrary to what Al-Himyari states in his account, in Malta there was possibly already some type of rural habitation before its repopulation with new settlers in the second half of the 11th century. On the basis of what occurred in other parts of the Mediterranean which came under the dominance of the Muslim world, it is also possible that during the early phase of the islands' Islamic occupation the rural natives made use of locally made pottery of Byzantine influence (Vaccaro 2013: 34-69). It was probably in these rural establishments that the peasants, village craftsmen and slaves conducted their daily social and economic activities. In the absence of further historical evidence it is unclear whether during this period the peasants had any possibility to become landowners or to have access to higher social positions; their life was probably tied to the land, working the estates of their lords as tenant farmers. It is unlikely that serfdom existed during this phase; apart from the absence of historical records, this system of servitude went contrary to the fundamental teachings of Islam.

Therefore, these snapshots throw light on the whole spectrum of the local Islamic society and class structure: the ruling elite and the lesser nobility (*al-khassa*) at the top, followed by the common people (*al-għamma*), and then the rural peasantry and urban poor.

It seems that during this period the local community consisted of a Muslim majority and of Christian and Jewish minorities, the latter possibly being the indigenous groups that survived the islands' Muslim invasion. All non-Muslim subjects, the *dhimmi*, were however required to pay a poll-tax known as the *gisia* (Abulafia 2007: 280; Davis-Secord 2007: 51). The dominance of Muslim religion even until 1250 is confirmed by Burkhardt von Strasbourg, an ambassador of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa to Saladin, who in 1175 claimed that that these islands were inhabited by Saracens (Blouet 1993: 38). This is further testified by Giliberto Abbate's mid-thirteenth-century report, which shows a high presence of Muslim families. The discovery of an Islamic cemetery just outside Mdina, datable to the 12th century, is a further testimony of the persistence of Islam even after Islamic rule was overthrown in Malta in the late 11th century (Dalli 2006: 275).

The presence of different religious denominations during this phase points to a multicultural society, in which people practised different religious faiths and traditions. For instance, while the Christians and Jews probably continued to bury their dead in

rock-cut underground hypogea, the Muslim community interred its deceased members in typical Muslim graves (Wettinger 1986: 87-104).

There is also evidence that each of these communities had their own place of worship (Buhagiar 1979: 328; De Lucca 1995: 33, 35). From a linguistic point of view, Arabic seems to have become the language of the majority and the main means of communication with the rest of the Islamic world. Through the influence of Italian and Sicilian the local Semitic dialect that survived in the Medieval period gradually developed into modern Maltese. The earliest piece of Maltese literature, consisting of a short poem by Pietro Caxaro, which incidentally also makes reference to a house, is the only evidence showing that in the 15th century the Semitic element of the Maltese language was still dominant. It suggests that the native language was spoken by the common people and probably also by at least a section of the elite class; considering that Caxaro belonged to the local nobility, it seems plausible that some of the Maltese nobles were also able to write in this language (section 4.2 below).

The historical evidence, particularly the local toponomy which refers to an overwhelming presence of male titles (or honorifics) and nicknames, suggests that this phase was characterized by a dominantly patriarchal society, like in all other Muslim countries (Boone and Benco 1999: 67), in which women were excluded from any public offices (Costa and Noble 1986: 163; Nevett 2003: 105).

With their re-christianization from the early 12th century onwards, in the context of the Norman occupation, the Maltese islands gradually became part of the European Christian world. However, this was a slow acculturation process. Many inhabitants continued to practise their Islamic faith, while vestiges of Oriental culture survived locally in specific areas, notably in agriculture, language and architecture.

From the 12th century onwards the Islamic system of administration was replaced by a feudal system, with many of the fief holders being Sicilian, Italian or Spanish (Cini 2003: 39-40). The Catholic religion became the dominant one. The Church exercised a strong influence on the people and their spiritual needs were catered for by the village priests. Annual religious feasts, like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, were to be strictly observed, while the consumption of certain food, for instance milk and meat, was prohibited on numerous religious days (Fiorini 1993a: 194-97). The deep devotion of the Maltese is manifested in the many built churches and chapels that can still be seen in various parts of these islands, some of which date back to as early as the 14th century. The Christian community in Malta flourished in late medieval times. This is confirmed by De Mello's 1436 inventory, listing twelve parishes which existed already in 1436 (Dalli 2006: 189). A parish church did not necessarily form part of a settlement; for example, that of Bir Miftuħ (near the village of Gudja) was surrounded by open stretches of land, but was located in an area which was accessible from a number of nearby villages and hamlets (Fiorini 1993a: 88-89). This demonstrates that, originally, each parish served as a focal point for a number of small dispersed villages and hamlets. The establishment of various benefices and foundations by private individuals gave them the right for burial inside churches. It was also a common practice for the faithful to bequeath a piece of land or a sum of money to the Church before they died.

Thus, the Church gradually became a wealthy institution and one of the country's major landowners (Dalli 2006: 225-26).

From the 12th century onwards, under Norman influence, the local class structure was modelled on the European feudal system. It was essentially divided into a number of highly segmented social layers, namely:

a) **the elite class**: this consisted of the following groups:
   i. the fief holders: these were the country's major landowners, whose estates were usually worked by labourers, serfs and slaves and managed by agricultural managers, comparable to what occurred in Sicily (Epstein 2002: 165-66). In return, the landowner usually provided the agricultural manager (*massaro*) with certain benefits, for example a house where to live and manage the estates, and a percentage of the land's produce (Caruana 2009: 57). By the 14th century the elite included the titled nobility as well as the urban gentry, for example judges, legal experts, notaries and leading entrepreneurs, who were also wealthy landowners (Dalli 2006: 243-44). Most of the members of this group, who generally occupied all the senior positions within the *universitas*, lived in Mdina or in the Gozo Castello, unless they lived abroad;
   ii. the Church: this had its own hierarchical organization: the bishop, the capitular vicar, the precentor, the archdeacon, the canons and the prelates of the Cathedral, the parish priests and the clergy (Dalli 2006: 132-33). The higher echelons of the local Church, including the bishopric, were usually occupied by Sicilian, Italian or Spanish priests, who in turn enjoyed various benefices from private foundations (Cini 2003: 75-80). While the Church dignitaries lived in Mdina, the earliest convents were established in Rabat (the suburb of Mdina) and Birgu;
   iii. the military class: this consisted of a group of foreign knights and trained soldiers (mainly Italian, French or Spanish), who guarded the three local castles (Mdina and the *Castrum Maris* in Malta and the Castello in Gozo) (Dalli 2006: 44, 132-34);

b) **the middle class**: this comprised the following groups:
   i. the professional group: this included doctors, surgeons, pharmacists, schoolmasters, amongst others (Fiorini 1993a: 150). They usually lived in the islands' urban centres;
   ii. the business group: this consisted of artisans, businessmen, agricultural entrepreneurs, corsairs, middlemen, among others (Vassallo 2008: 23). They resided in the urban settlements, particularly in Birgu, or in the major villages;

c) **serfs, labourers and apprentices**: this was the most extensive social class, characterized by persons whose life depended on agriculture and animal husbandry, on seasonal employment or on a variety of petty jobs. Serfs were often specialized in mixed farming (Wettinger 1982: 35-38). Other members of this group worked as fishermen, who usually supplied fresh fish to the local fish market outside Mdina (Dalli 2006: 223). Male peasants aged between

eighteen and sixty-five were also required to do service in the local militia to guard the city walls and coastal watch towers.

Labourers were hired either to work on the agricultural estates during specific seasons of the year or to perform other tasks connected with public works. Although most of these people lived in small villages and hamlets, others inhabited the poorer quarters of the towns or the suburban settlements. Until the 13th century, comparable to the rest of Europe, there were presumably no free peasants on the island, since these were all part of the feudal system which existed at that time. The conditions of serfdom presumably limited the possibilities of peasants to accumulate wealth and invest in property;

d) **the slaves and the destitute**: the slaves were either domestic servants or worked on the lord's agricultural estates. Slaves enjoyed no rights and could be bought, hired or sold at any price and time (Busuttil 2003: 36-38). Slaves were usually Muslims who were captured during privateering activities. Once manumitted, a slave became a free person and was no longer tied to the owner. This class includes also the unemployed, beggars, prostitutes and fortune tellers.

The historical evidence, therefore, supports the idea that the class structure of the local late medieval urban settlements was similar to that of other contemporary cosmopolitan towns in Europe (Epstein 2002: 358-60, 363-64). In Mdina and the Gozo Castello, including their respective suburbs, lived not only the nobles, government officials and Church dignitaries, but also members of different professions, artisans and businessmen, shopkeepers, landless peasants, labourers and domestic slaves. Birgu was more concerned with the island's medieval business community, although there were also many craftsmen, shopkeepers, labourers and slaves (Bezzina 2001: 18, 29; Aquilina 2002: 43). Comparable to what happened in other parts of contemporary Europe, outside the urban centres the rural villages and hamlets were occupied mostly by the peasants (Blok 1969: 131; Wettinger 1982: 5); in the major villages one could also find some shopkeepers, taverners and craftsmen (Wettinger 1982: 3).

According to early fifteenth-century population estimates approximately 75% of the local population lived in the rural settlements, while the remaining 25% was spread in the three urban centres (Fiorini 1993a: 122-26; Dalli 2011: 46). This local population distribution compares well with the situation that occurred elsewhere in Europe and the Mediterranean before the early modern era (Bintliff 2014a: 205).

The liberalization of the land market in the Kingdom of Sicily, through a new legislation promulgated by Frederick III in 1296 (Epstein 2002: 165), and the abolition of serfdom in the late 13th/early 14th century, brought about a reconceptualization of landownership, and therefore of the elite class. The historical evidence indicates that this phenomenon occurred also in Malta (Wettinger 1982: 11-12). The shift from serfdom to free peasant status meant that serfs were no longer attached to their owners, but could move freely to cultivate their own lands (Epstein 1991: 26). A land free market implied that land was now available for whoever had enough capital and was no longer monopolized by a small group of fief holders. Landownership spread across the country, which led to whole estates being parcelled out into smaller enclosed portions

of land to meet the demand of an increasing number of middle and lower class landowners, as happened in other European countries (Pluciennik, Mientjes and Giannitrapani 2004: 35).

Consequently, this shift in landownership required the employment of paid labourers to cultivate the estates and rear the animals. Despite this new situation, 15th and early sixteenth-century records reveal that the major landowners in Malta and Gozo remained the fief holders, the nobles, the entrepreneurs and the Church (including the religious orders), while the small peasant farmers generally possessed between one and three parcels of land each. The historical evidence also indicates that, as in Sicily and South Italy (Blok 1969: 132), the estates of peasant small owners were more widely dispersed and further from the village than those of the Church or the large estate owners (Wettinger 1982: 6-7). On the basis of the available late medieval documents, Wettinger (1982: 6) estimates that, as a result of the liberalization of the land market, by the late 15th century approximately 63% of the land remained in the hands of the major landowners (mainly the fief holders and the Church), while the middle and lower classes of society managed to acquire the remaining 37% of the total land.

Peasant land possession created a distinction within the same local peasant class and put them in a superior position than their Sicilian counterparts who hardly ever possessed any land (Blok 1959: 124; Lansing and English 2012: 70). Landed peasants sometimes rented their estates to tenant farmers when they could not work it themselves. While the reconceptualization of land ownership boosted the urban and rural middle classes, as occurred in other parts of Europe (Kamen 1984: 124-27), the established elite still remained politically, economically and socially dominant. Nevertheless, landownership gradually became a clear symbol of a person's economic status despite the social background.

Another important aspect concerned with the social organization of medieval Malta, which is also closely related to social class and status, is the family. Similar to the late medieval family structure in Sicily, the majority of the families in Malta, particularly from the lower class, were of the nuclear type (Epstein 2002: 349-50; Caruana 2009: 67). Moss and Thomson (1959: 38) define the late medieval nuclear family as "*father-dominant and mother-centred*". Among the elite, the father was considered as the family's head and breadwinner, while the mother was the household manager and childbearer. However, among the lower class the situation was quite different and women had no other alternative but to work also outside the house as servants or hawkers or to help their husbands in the fields.

In the case of children, when a daughter got married her parents allotted her a dowry, while a son was endowed to enable him to marry and establish his own family. Before getting married, a woman also received a *dodarium* (or a cash gift) from her future husband. A dowry was usually registered in a notarial contract, however there is evidence, especially among the peasant community, that certain dowry arrangements were reached verbally in front of witnesses (Cassar 1993: 466). The value of the dowry depended in particular on the parents' economic and social status.

In medieval society it was considered inappropriate for women to occupy public positions. Under the influence of the Church, people believed that a woman's place was

her own home, while the husband was responsible for the management of his wife's dowry, for all legal or notarial transactions and for any other economic or commercial activities outside the house. In fact, it was not customary for women to act as witnesses in notarial contracts, and when it was essential for her to go to a notary she was generally accompanied by a male relative (Scicluna 2008: 66-69). Therefore, men were considered as superior to women in all aspects.

Marriage gave status to a woman, while the dowry provided her with a sense of security that could be retained and bequeathed to her children (Scicluna 2008: 68). For her, marriage also meant a sense of investment and certainty after the demise of her husband (Vassallo 2008: 37). Once a woman got married and received her dowry she was eliminated from her parents' inheritance (Cini 2003: 22). The choice of marriage partners was not for love or affection, but for social and economic needs. In this hierarchical, highly segmented, society it was not possible for a person to marry a partner from a different social class. Among the nobility a marriage was considered as an alliance between two aristocratic families (Busuttil 2003: 71-77). Since life expectancy at that time was not high, a twenty to twenty-two year old woman was usually considered to be fit for marriage.

During this period there was not a proper education system. Apart from the fact that there was no full-time compulsory schooling, education was reserved for a minority who could afford it. Historical records indicate that the schoolmaster of Mdina was paid by the *università* to provide children with basic education in certain subjects like Religion and Latin, while at parish level some clerics gave a similar service. Well-off parents could afford to educate their children abroad, for example in Sicilian or Italian universities (Fiorini 1993a: 184). For most of the children their teachers were the parents; boys usually accompanied their father on the farm estates or in the workshop, while the girls stayed at home with their mother to help in domestic work. This situation led to a rampant illiteracy and to a lack of personal hygiene. Poor health standards were often the cause of epidemics which spread like wildfire. However, the Mdina and the Gozo *universitas* still did their utmost to ensure good health services in the hospitals and to control waste disposal and any possible contamination of drinking water (Fiorini 1993a: 150-52).

Among the foreigners who lived in Malta and belonged to different social classes, there was also a Jewish community, which until its expulsion in the 15th century held its quarters in the three urban centres. In Malta and Gozo several Jews were involved in the business sector, while others were wealthy landowners or belonged to different professions (Caruana 2009: 14; Dalli 2011: 80; 242-43). The Jews had their own synagogues and tribunals and were allowed to follow their practices and traditions and to have their community representatives (Dalli 2006: 190-91; Scicluna 2008: 72).

The historical records also provide information on the quality of life in medieval Malta. A good standard of living depended much on a person's social and economic status. Fiorini (1993a: 170-72) argues that in the 15th and early 16th century the salary of a common labourer did not rise much when compared to those of the *università* officials. He also observed that during the same period many food products became more expensive, implying that lower class people could simply not afford them. This

situation also meant that many peasants and poor people had to live all the year round on a simple diet which largely consisted of bread, garnished with oil or fat, and vegetables; meat and wine were a luxury which were consumed only on special occasions (Fiorini 1993a: 171). In contrast, the well-off could afford a more varied diet which included pasta, meat, fish, fruit and wine.

Another indicator of the quality of life is the dress code, through which it was easy to determine the class a particular person belonged to. A number of notarial contracts, consisting mainly of dowries or inventories of personal possessions, have revealed that the elite and the well-off usually could afford to have fine quality clothes, precious and semi-precious stones as well as different jewellery items. Imported textiles such as silk and linen usually feature in records that deal specifically with this same social class (Fiorini 2006a: 263). The peasants and the destitute were dressed in simpler, locally made clothes of cotton or wool. Like their European counterparts, while the elite kept themselves in line with European fashion trends, the peasants kept on wearing costumes, the fashion of which remained unchanged from one generation to the other (Cassar 1993: 449-50; Izbicki 2009: 37-53).

Houses and furniture were two other indicators of the quality of life in medieval Malta. The available sources show that the elite, Church dignitaries, the major landowners, leading entrepreneurs and members of the different professions lived close to the centre of the urban settlements in sumptuous houses that permitted a comfortable lifestyle, as occurred in South Italy and Sicily (Sabelberg 1986: 60); the few medieval houses that have survived in Mdina and the Gozo Castello, for example Falson Palace and Santa Sofia Palace in Mdina, are a good example of this concept. In contrast, the peasants, labourers and the poor lived in dwellings that were generally more restricted in space and simpler in style. These were usually located in the outskirts of the urban centres and in the villages (De Lucca 1995: 39; Jaccarini 2002). Therefore, as pointed out by Sabelberg (1986: 59) the house location and property price usually reflected the person's social status and quality of life. Those who could not afford to buy their own property had no other choice but to rent a house according to their financial means (*Acts* Giacomo Zabbara 15-v-1487: R494/1 f. 96v-97). Others lived in cave-dwellings spread in different localities.

Although in medieval times it was not customary for the elite and peasant families to possess many furniture items in their houses, their quality was certainly a clear symbol of the owner's social and economic status. In the local records, imported fine quality furniture, tableware and house furnishings generally feature in lavish dowries or in the inventories of personal possessions that belonged to well-off families (*Acts* Paolo Bonello 5-xi-1467: MS 588 f. 43v). Apart from status, these references also cast light on the way people lived. Some of these items were probably meant for everyday use, but others may have been intended for special occasions, for example when guests were present. Rural houses had simpler and locally produced furniture, usually of an inferior quality (see analysis in Chapter 8).

2.2.3 The economy

Like all other European pre-industrialized countries, Malta's medieval economy depended mostly on agriculture, including land cultivation and animal husbandry. For the peasants in particular this was their only means of livelihood (Wettinger 1982: 2-3). Al-Idrisi's twelfth-century description, that Malta abounds in grazing land, flocks, fruit and honey suggests that by this period the island's economy was still partly based on pastoralism. The abundance of pastureland might suggest that lands which, by the early Medieval period, had been converted into arable, were still being utilized in the 12th century for animal grazing (Dalli 2006: 80). In traditional Mediterranean farming, alternate year fallow allows grazing as does the post harvest grazing on stubble. The importance of animal husbandry in these islands is supported by a large number of place-names which include terms of Semitic origin, for example *mrieħel* (plural of *merħla*, meaning animal pens) and *mrejħla* (a small animal pen). That horticulture and apiculture probably also contributed to the local twelfth-century economy is suggested by several other toponyms that contain the Semitic terms *ġnien* (a garden), *ġnejna* (a small garden), and *miġbħa* (bee-hives) (Wettinger 1975; 2000). There are also indications that the Arabs possibly introduced into the islands new crops, like cotton, as well as more efficient farming methods, for example the *sienja* (an animal-powered device for lifting water), as occurred in other parts of the Mediterranean world (Blouet 1993: 37; Epstein 2002: 185; Bintliff 2014a: 207).

Under the domination of European rulers from the Norman period onwards the local latifundia-like estates, which now belonged to the new rulers or the major fief holders and were mostly worked by serfs and slaves, as in Sicily and South Italy, became specialized in the cultivation of staple crops: wheat, barley and *maħlut* (a mix of wheat and barley) (Wettinger 1982: 13-15; Dalli 2009: 35-36; Bintliff 2014a: 208). Barley was usually used by the peasants to produce inferior quality bread and to feed their livestock.

Comparable to what occurred from the mid-13th century onwards in different parts of Europe the liberalization of the local land market, the abolition of serfdom and the general demographic decline caused by the expulsion of Muslims, enemy attacks, epidemics, bad harvest and famine brought a shift from an agricultural system based on subsistence farming to one which was more specialized, labour intensive and more commercially oriented (Blouet 1978: 374; Epstein 2002: 165-66; Bintliff 2014a: 209). This had an impact on the farming economy and wealth creation, which also affected the lifestyle and standard of living of many inhabitants. Many of the grain estates were given over for the cultivation of important cash crops, namely cotton, cumin, flax and hemp (Blouet 1993: 41-42). The local wheat production declined as these cash crops became more intensively cultivated and exported to foreign markets. Consequently, the local late medieval situation required the importation of more grain supplies from Sicily to meet the local demand (Dalli 2006: 200). This economic shift led to an improved standard of living among the Maltese, even the peasant community, as well as to more market integration. The specialization in cotton production and its promotion in foreign markets developed the local economy from one that was locally oriented to one that was more open to international trade. High quality exportable products required the

enforcement of various trade regulations and the ratification of commercial agreements with other countries.

As a raw material, local cotton was sold in Sicily, Italy, Spain and North Africa (Wettinger 1982: 15; Epstein 2002: 186, 303). Its cultivation required specialized farmers (*cuttuneria*) and it was sold in its raw state, ginned or spun into yarn (Dalli 2006: 222-23). As a cash crop, cotton often served as a means through which farm labourers were paid for their work, while it is also mentioned in several dowries and notarial contracts. Although most of the local cotton was intended to be exported in its raw state, its cultivation also led to the development of a small, cottage-based, textile industry which mainly employed peasant women. Most of these local textile products were intended for the local market, while other finer quality ones were sold abroad (Scicluna 2008: 80). While flax and hemp were mostly cultivated for local consumption, cumin was also marketed abroad although it never fetched the same market demand as cotton (Wettinger 1982: 3).

The smaller rural estates were usually characterized by the cultivation of staple crops, but the development of a crop rotation system permitted that the production of wheat and barley was alternated with that of other products (Blouet 1993: 44; Busuttil 2003: 51). The local viticulture, which was so popular in the Roman period (Bonanno 2005: 298-309) but declined in the Islamic phase, was apparently re-introduced during the 13th century (Wettinger 1982: 23-24). However the importation of wine from Sicily on an almost regular basis suggests that viticulture was not a major contributor to the local agriculture, although there is evidence that vineyards were spread across the country (Wettinger 1982: 22).

The geological set-up of the islands favoured extensive animal husbandry, particularly in karstic and non-arable areas. In medieval times this was important for the production of meat, cheese, milk, wool and leather. This industry also contributed to the production of manure, which served as a fertilizer for the cereal fields (Epstein 1991: 35; 2002: 174). In the local historical records there is reference to the breeding of various animals. Mules and donkeys were mainly used by the farmers and merchants for the transportation of goods as well as for the *centimoli* (an animal driven flour mill), while horses were usually owned by the military, the elite and the professional class. Meat products were usually for local consumption, but their exportation to Sicily is also documented in the late medieval records (Caruana 2009: 44-46). Both peasants and nobles had cattle, although the latter owned more numerous herds. Apart from their land estates, the fief holders, entrepreneurial farmers and clergymen also leased their cattle to tenant herdsmen (Wettinger 1982: 35-38). Since agricultural plots were not always extensive, mixed farming seems to have been the best solution for most peasant farmers (Dalli 2006: 223).

While Mdina and the Gozo Castello were important for the regulation of trade, for the establishment of prices and for the issuing of trade licences, Birgu was the only point of contact with the outside world. It was from here that the merchandise was exported or imported, including slaves (Dalli 2006: 159). In the urban and suburban settlements there was also a community of skilled craftsmen, for example carpenters, blacksmiths, coppersmiths, potters, quarrymen and stonemasons. In addition to these,

other trading activities were carried out by a number of shopkeepers and taverners, with their shops being spread in the towns and major villages.

The islands' limited natural resources and particular climate made the local economy very fragile. Apart from the fact that Malta had to import a number of products which were not available locally, for example timber, lead and iron, local agriculture and fishing depended much on favourable climatic conditions; a long period of drought or inclement weather could easily result in disastrous situations, such as bad harvest, famine and loss of life. Malta's geographical position and arid climate are two main factors why these islands sometimes experience long periods of drought. Based on our available meteorological records, it is estimated that these islands are likely to suffer periods of moderate or extreme drought, on average, every seven to eight years.

In addition to the islands' most important natural resource, the local limestone, which was extensively used for the building industry for various types of buildings, including churches, palaces and houses, there was also salt which was extracted from the coastal saltpans for the preservation of meat, fish, vegetables and hides (Cassar 1997: 140).

2.2.4 The settlements

This section deals with settlement evolution in medieval Malta. It is based on a study of different historical records and also on an analysis of the local toponomy, material culture and archaeological remains. The earliest historical evidence that makes reference to local medieval centres of habitation is Al-Himyari's account, which narrates how the Arabs conquered these islands, razed a fortress to the ground (*hisn*), the location of which is not mentioned, depopulated the island and built a *madina* in the early 11th century. Al-Himyari provides no further information about any other native urban or rural settlements.

That the Islamic *madina* mentioned by Al-Himyari is synonymous with the medieval town of Mdina is confirmed by its toponym (Mdina derives from the Arabic *madina*, meaning a town) as well as by the archaeological evidence (Dalli 2006: 44). Recent excavations in Mdina have revealed that the Roman town of Melite, which roughly extended to where St. Paul's church now stands, in the centre of Rabat, was reduced in size and was partly refortified by the Byzantines during the 8th century. These archaeological explorations also demonstrated that by not later than the early 12th century Mdina had been already reduced to its present day size (De Lucca 1995: 18) (Figure 2.2). This is confirmed by the discovery of an Islamic twelfth-century cemetery just outside the walls of Mdina (Caruana 1881; Zammit 1925; Grassi 1989). From the 13th century onwards the remaining part of the former Roman city which was not included into the new medieval citadel formed the suburb of Rabat (De Lucca 1995: 27). The site of the medieval city probably attracted the new settlers because of its centrally strategic position. The surrounding area was characterized by fertile valleys and natural water springs, which made agriculture possible.

That the Islamic Mdina was built instead of an earlier centrally-located settlement on the same location is a phenomenon which occurred in various parts of the Islamic

world (Lapidus 1967: 69-70; Redman, Anzalone and Rubertone 1979: 1-3; Boone and Benco 1999: 57-58).

There are also indications that in the 12th century the town's fortifications underwent another phase of reconstruction with the addition of more defensive walls and a tower (Dalli 2006: 264). Further urban planning in Mdina and restoration works on its walls continued in subsequent centuries until the mid-15th century, with the opening of a new gate, the demolition of the medieval castle, and the creation of more open spaces (De Lucca 1995: 29-30).

Although from the 12th century onwards Malta was drawn more into the European realm, aspects of Islamic culture, for example the language, architecture and town-planning, persisted even after the expulsion of Muslims from the islands in the mid-13th century. For example, a planimetric analysis of present day Mdina suggests that this medieval town still retains some of its Islamic urban past, particularly its narrow and maze-like streets (Costa and Noble 1986: 163). This reminds us of the North African *madinas* like Mahdia and Sousse in Tunisia (Buhagiar 1991: 16; De Lucca 1995: 35). The hot arid conditions of the North African desert encouraged town builders to group together houses and buildings along a set of narrow and winding streets to provide shade and to create relatively cool microclimates (Costa and Noble 1986: 163). On the basis of this evidence and considering Malta's typically hot climate, especially in summer, it can be assumed that the streets of Mdina were not the result of disorganized town-planning, but were purposely planned to ensure favourable climatic conditions (Figures 2.3 (a) and (b)). Comparable to what occurred in other Islamic *madinas* the narrow and maze-like streets of Mdina were probably also intended to prevent easy movement to ensure privacy.

Another common characteristic of these *madinas* is their defensive walls (Ahmed and Kamel 1996: 107; Boone and Benco 1999: 59). Although no Muslim phase buildings have survived in Mdina, its particular streetscape leads us to deduce that it probably resembled a typical Arab fortified citadel. A long winding spine road possibly led to the main public buildings of the town, for example the Friday mosque, which according to scholars was possibly built over the remains of a Byzantine church to be later replaced by a Christian cathedral during the Norman period (Buhagiar 1991: 14; De Lucca 1995: 21, 24-25). Like any typical Islamic town, Mdina's main thoroughfare possibly also led to other public areas, for example the bazaar (*suk*), the school (*madrasa*), palaces and other private residences (Costa and Noble 1986: 165). Incidentally, although in later medieval times Mdina experienced the rise of new buildings which followed European architectural styles, this part of the town remained synonymous with the local elite and was, in fact, known as *Harit il-Mwieli* (the street of the lords, renamed Villeagaignon Street in later times) (Figure 2.4).

An analysis of an eighteenth-century document conserved at the Mdina Cathedral Archives has revealed that access to the medieval town was through three entry points (ACM Miscellanea 60: f. vi). The outermost one led to a narrow corridor where several military stores and a small church were situated. From this space the second access point led to an area dominated by a hive of shops datable to the 13th century. From here

a third entry point provided access to a small rectangular *piazza* which led to the main part of the town (De Lucca 1995: 33).

The late medieval sumptuous palaces and the inferior quality dwellings that survived the 1693 earthquake, and which still exist today, support our previous observation that, during the late Medieval period Mdina was inhabited by different social classes. The elite houses of this town were situated in the centre of the town, while lower class dwellings were located on the outskirts.

Just outside the walls of Mdina, Rabat developed into a thriving suburb in which a community of artisans, labourers and landless peasants lived. The latter commuted on a regular basis, like those of Mdina, to the immediate arable hinterland to earn their daily living. Eventually, by the 15th century Rabat became also the centre of several religious orders which established their convents in its different quarters. Rabat seems to have emulated Mdina's streetscape, since its centre is likewise characterized by a network of narrow, winding streets and *culs-de-sac*.

There are archaeological indications that another urban settlement developed in central Gozo, in an area that previously formed part of a Roman settlement. This Roman fortified town was dominated by an acropolis, where the medieval Castello stands today, and stretched to what now constitutes the heart of modern day Victoria (Bonanno 2005: 248-49). The presence of human habitation in this area during this period has been confirmed by the presence of late tenth-/early eleventh-century ceramic sherds, including polychrome glazed pottery, which were unearthed during archaeological excavations (Dalli 2006: 60-61). Similar examples of this pottery has been identified in Sicily, North Africa and Spain (Boone and Benco 1999: 66). This evidence supports the hypothesis that Mdina and this settlement were occupied during the same period. However, archaeological explorations in the Citadel have not yet brought to light any buildings datable to this period. The streetscape of the Citadel is similar to that of Mdina, meaning that this settlement possibly followed the same Islamic town planning concepts. Its strategically central position, like Mdina, made it an ideal place from where any potential enemy incursion could be detected. Eventually it developed into a medieval Castello and became the island's centre of administration (Bezzina 1985: 11). The remaining part of the old Roman town which was not incorporated into the medieval castle soon developed into a small suburb, also called Rabat.

In the heart of the Grand Harbour of Malta a maritime settlement, Birgu, developed close to the thirteenth-century *Castrum Maris* (Bugeja, Buhagiar and Fiorini 1993) (Figures 2.5 and 2.6). There is no historical evidence when this medieval castle, which was the only defensive system in the Grand Harbour at the time and served as a shelter for the maritime nearby settlement of Birgu, was built, however there are indications that it could have already existed since the 12th century. Pre-fifteenth-century documents refer to the presence in Birgu of some ashlar houses and to agricultural plots of land in between buildings, suggesting that until this time human habitation in this settlement was still sparse (Buhagiar 1991: 18). This is further confirmed by Quintin's sixteenth-century description and map of the Maltese islands, which show that by 1530 Birgu had still a relatively small number of houses, many of which were in a poor state

(Quintin 1536: B2v). According to Quintin's map Birgu was sheltered by the *Castrum Maris* and by a landward defence wall on its southern side (Figure 1.6).

Outside the urban and suburban settlements the rest of the local community settled in rural hamlets to cultivate the land and rear the animals. The earliest documented references to medieval open settlements date back to the late 14th century, although there is archaeological evidence that certain parts of rural Malta could have already been settled before, in the late 10th or the early 11th century. These sites include Ġnien is-Sultan (in the parish of Rabat), Ta' Ċieda (in the parish of San Ġwann), and Tas-Silġ (in the parish of Marsaxlokk). However, the available archaeological and historical data are certainly not enough to determine the possible type, layout and extent of any rural settlement that could have existed locally in early medieval Malta (Figure 2.7).

Apart from the open villages, there were also cave settlements spread in different areas. Evidence of cave-dwelling in Malta dates back to before the Medieval period and was a phenomenon that finds its origins in Neolithic times (Buhagiar 2002; 2012; 2013). Cave habitations also occur commonly in various parts of the Mediterranean, including Sicily, South Italy and North Africa (Messina 1989; Camps 1996).

In the Maltese islands there were two types of cave habitations: the adaptation of natural karst depressions and the cliff-face settlements (Buhagiar 2012: 160). Certain cave settlements, for example those of Is-Simblija in the parish of Dingli, were rather elaborate and, besides the habitation quarters and animal pens, also included a chapel (Saliba, Magro Conti and Borg 2002: 25-29). It is not easy to determine precisely the date of these settlements, because none of them have been studied in an archaeological context (Messina 1989: 117-18; Dalli 2006: 282-83).

Cave settlements occur mostly in northern and western Malta where most natural caves are found or where it was easy for humans to excavate such dwellings (Buhagiar 2002: 268, 275; 2012: 153, 157; 2013: 105-106). Caves were left in their natural state or else were modified to adapt them to the inhabitants' specific needs. There are indications that, in the early 16th century, some of the houses of medieval Birgu were hewn out of the rock (Quintinus 1536: B2v). That cave-dwelling was still a widespread phenomenon in early sixteenth-century Malta is confirmed by Quintin (1536: B4v), who states that cave-dwellings occurred everywhere on these islands (Figure 2.8).

On the basis of the available evidence one can assume that, at a certain point in time during the Medieval period, open and cave villages and hamlets existed concomitantly. It is also possible that these two types of settlements were inhabited by groups of people who represented different levels of wealth and standard of living among the local medieval peasantry.

Figure 2.9 shows the likely distribution of built-up and cave settlements in the late 14th century; the list of these settlements is much longer, but several of them could not be located on this map since the available records do not provide any clear indication regarding their location. An interesting observation that emerges from this settlement pattern is the presence of a centrally located urban centre in Malta, and of another one in Gozo, with the rural settlements being scattered in different parts of Malta. Birgu, being Malta's only point of contact with the outside world, was the only maritime urban centre. As far as Gozo is concerned, there was only one settlement outside the medieval

Castello, the island's only urban centre. This suburb is still known as Rabat, although in the 19th century it was renamed Victoria by the British. For many centuries, even in post-medieval times, the population of Gozo remained concentrated in the Castello and its suburb, because the island was often exposed to sudden enemy or pirate attacks (Scicluna 2008: 8). This possibly also meant that, as happened in Malta, many of the Gozo urban peasants cultivated their lands or reared their animals close to these settlements, where they had the shortest distance possible (based on a normal walking distance of 5 km per hour). Those who had to walk over longer distances to reach their fields possibly constituted a much smaller group as this was seemingly less practical. In Malta the situation appears to have been different since there was a dispersion of settlements, which meant that the peasants probably tried to establish their settlements where the land was suitable for farming and grazing, especially where there was the presence of water and where they could reach their lands in the shortest time possible (Fiorini 1993a: 143; Arthur 2012: 552). Other factors that may have influenced the location of these settlements were the position of other nearby settlements, the distance to suitable building materials as well as the proximity to the main routes, roads and markets (Hodder and Orton 1989: 53; Bintliff 2014a: 204).

Many of the earliest open rural settlements of Malta were identified by the prefix *ħal* or *raħal*. Dalli (2006: 83) believes that the term *raħal* probably implied a farmstead or a rural establishment. However, through time this term seems to have been semantically widened to include the labour force attached to the village. It is interesting to note that, similar to what happened in Sicily, some of these villages were named after family names or nicknames, for example Ħal Lija or Ħal Sayd, while others were characterized by place-names that are of a purely topographical significance.

According to Wettinger (1975: 192) a number of settlements had disappeared by 1419, particularly those located close to the coast or the harbours. Blouet (1978: 374) believes that, apart from the perennial problem of sudden pirate or enemy attacks on the island, another reason which led to settlement desertion was the shift from a subsistence based economy to one dominated by the cultivation of cash crops (section 2.2.3 above). This phenomenon becomes more evident by the early decades of the 15th century when there seems to have been an attempt for less settlement dispersion, as Figure 2.10 demonstrates. For example, by 1420 no record of open villages is registered in northern Malta, while those located in the Grand Harbour area, except for Birgu, had likewise disappeared. Western and south-eastern Malta experienced a similar situation, although it was comparatively more evident in the latter. There could have been three main reasons why fewer settlements were abandoned by the early 15th century in western Malta:

a) the land is fertile for agricultural purposes and it is the area in Malta where most springs of perennial water occur;
b) the southern shoreline of this district is marked by a series of cliff systems that do not permit easy access to the enemy;
c) Mdina was within easy walking distance from all parts of this district.

South-eastern Malta, characterized by its flat plain and sheltered harbours and inlets, was potentially more prone to sudden enemy attacks. Therefore, this could have been one of the main reasons why several hamlets in this area were abandoned. Concerning Gozo, the population remained concentrated only in the Citadel and its suburb.

It was also observed that many of the hamlets and villages in Malta were located within less than 3 km away from the urban settlements, which made it easier for the peasants to reach the towns in case of a sudden enemy attack or when they wanted to transport their goods to the town markets. Under normal walking conditions a distance of 3 km would be covered in a period of approximately thirty to forty minutes.

The historical evidence shows that while certain hamlets were deserted, others became more populated and eventually achieved parish status. This means that by the first half of the 15th century there was already a certain degree of hierarchical organization of settlements, at least on a parochial basis, since parishes usually had a number of minor hamlets under their care. The expansion of the major settlements also generated more influence on the social and economic organization of the nearby hamlets (Blouet 1993: 42). It is possible that these parishes also exercised some political control over the nearby hamlets, especially when considering that representatives of each parish were elected annually to serve on the Mdina *università* (Scicluna 2008: 5).

Figure 2.11 shows the distribution of settlements just before 1530. Here we observe a further shift towards more nucleation. While between 1420 and 1530 more villages and hamlets continued to be deserted, particularly those situated in coastal or harbour areas, others situated more inland increased in terms of population size. This map also indicates that some of the major settlements that prospered during the 15th and early 16th centuries developed to an extent that some of the hamlets nearby eventually were incorporated into the territorial limits of the major villages to form a single settlement. Mdina and the *Castrum Maris* and the shelter they provided may have been one of the main reasons that permitted the inland settlements to continue flourishing. For instance Rabat, Żebbuġ and Siġġiewi are all within close or reasonable walking distance from Mdina (between 3 and 5 km). Concerning Gozo, the Citadel and its suburb remained the only built-up settlements on that island.

The desertion of a number of hamlets as well as the concomitant expansion of inland settlements, with their development into parishes and proto-industrial centres, in the late Medieval period coincides with the general rise in population that the Maltese islands experienced from the early 15th century onwards (section 2.2.1 above). Apart from episodes of enemy or pirate attacks, this pattern seems also to suggest the gradual transmigration of the peasant population from the hamlets to the proto-industrial inland settlements, in a similar way as occurred in contemporary Europe (Epstein 2002: 117; Bintliff 2014a: 211). By the late 15th or the early 16th century the inland settlements became specialized in the cultivation of cash crops and provided more employment opportunities and services (Blouet 1978: 374). The remaining dispersed hamlets that survived by 1530 were probably those whose inhabitants still depended on subsistence farming, on animal husbandry or both (Blouet 1993: 41-42).

The picture which emerges from this settlement distribution pattern is different from the one provided in Quintin's map (Figure 1.6), which gives us the impression that in the early 16th century several parts of these islands had been completely devoid of any human habitation.

One last point to observe is that the settlement pattern that developed during the 15th/16th centuries formed the basis for the modern settlement patterns. None of the local major villages that prospered during the late Medieval period, such as Żurrieq, Żebbuġ and Siġġiewi, were ever permanently deserted in later historical periods. They continued to grow in terms of population size, which eventually also led to the establishment of new parishes. However, in Gozo the situation remained unchanged, for the expansion of new villages on this island did not start before the 17th century (Bezzina 2003: 14; 2004: 17). From the available historical evidence one can also deduce that it was from the late Medieval period onwards that the local village configuration continued to develop in the way we know it today, thus consisting of groups of dwellings connected together by a network of narrow, winding roads and dominated by a church in the centre. While certain scholars argue that the Maltese village presumably expanded organically with no fixed or pre-established patterns (Tonna 1985: 26), comparable to what occurred in other Mediterranean countries like Greece (Bintliff 2010: 22-23; 2012a: 461), others argue that the streetscape of the local medieval village emulated that of the urban and suburban settlements to ensure favourable climatic conditions (Blouet 1978: 367). This particular street network could also possibly have been intended for defence purposes, in the sense that an enemy can easily be lost in the narrow winding streets, apart from the fact that communication between any two different points can be difficult. In this way, therefore, the late medieval Maltese village imitated the streetscape of the local urban settlements, and indirectly also that of other settlements abroad, in countries which, like Malta, are characterized by a hot and arid climate (Costa and Noble 1986: 163; Ahmed and Kamel 1996: 108).

2.3 The Knights' Period

In December 1522, after a six-month blockade, the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman I expelled his long time enemy, the Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, from Rhodes. Following a period of more than two hundred years of sovereign rule, the Order ended up homeless and for several years the Knights resided temporarily in the town of Viterbo, in Italy. Finally, Emperor Charles V of Spain donated to them the Maltese islands and the castle of Tripoli (in modern Libya), with the Act of Donation being signed in March 1530. From a report drawn by a commission of the Order that visited these islands some years before the Knights' arrival to investigate the islands' present state, several disadvantages were pointed out. Apart from the bad state of the fortifications, the main town was far away from the Harbour, the location of Birgu was inappropriate for their fleet, and the islands' inhabitants were poor, illiterate and not militarily trained. The only advantages mentioned were the islands' sheltered harbours

and their good quality limestone (Blouet 1993: 46; Sire 1994: 60-61). Coming from another Mediterranean island, which they ruled for many years and fortified with state-of-the-art defensive systems, they found Malta inadequate and a depressing place.

2.3.1 Political development

In 1530 the Order established itself in Birgu which became the islands' seat of administration. The Grand Master of the Order, L'Isle Adam, settled in the *Castrum Maris*, while the Knights bought or rented houses which they converted into administrative offices, auberges and residences. The church of St. Lawrence became the Order's place of private and communal worship.

This medieval military and hospitaller organization, established in the 11th century, consisted of a group of aristocratic knights who hailed from different parts of Europe, mainly Italy, France and Spain. By 1530 the Order was organized into eight *Langues* (or branches) that represented the main nationalities of the Knights (Freller 2010: 58). It was run by an elected Grand Master who usually retained his office for life. As head of the government he was assisted by a Grand Council and by various departments which were responsible for specific areas, for example the *Monte della Redenzione* which was responsible for the redemption of Christian slaves, or the *Magistrato degli Armamenti* which controlled the corsairing sector (Buttigieg 2003: 12-14). In Birgu the Order also established its law courts and a new *università*, which meant that Mdina's medieval municipal body had by now lost most of its administrative authority. A representative of the Order's government was established in Gozo to oversee matters. Due to these political changes the nobility of Mdina no longer enjoyed the rights and privileges they were granted by the Spanish kings (Blouet 1993: 49-50; Vassallo 2008: 54). Therefore, Mdina lost its status as a centre of administration and its place as an economic centre where goods were marketed, prices were fixed, and trading licenses were issued. However, for the community of Birgu the arrival of the Knights signified a period of prosperity. Apart from a change in townscape, Birgu also experienced a sudden rise in population to become the most important administrative and commercial centre on the island. In fact, it is estimated that from a community of about 500 people in 1530, this increased by about another 3,000 to include the Knights, their servants, soldiers and several Rhodeans (Blouet 1993: 70, 76; Cassar 1997: 141). From a small maritime settlement, Birgu became a cosmopolitan centre and the islands' main point of reference (Bezzina 2001: 17, 24-25, 28). The municipal type of government, by which the Maltese islands were characterized for a long period of time, was replaced by a centralized administration, where all political and economic decisions were now taken by a single organization.

In Malta and Gozo the Order became the major landowner, since all the land estates that before 1530 had been Crown property now became its possession. Apart from the incomes that accrued from the local estates, the Knights possessed various other holdings in different parts of Europe, particularly France, which they accumulated through the centuries (Freller 2010: 30-33).

The Church was the second highest authority in the country after the Order. The Bishop had his palace in Mdina, although he built a second one in Birgu and, later on, a

third one in Valletta. The Cathedral of Mdina remained his pastoral seat of office, where there was also a diocesan seminary. With the increase in local population, the expansion of settlements and the establishment of new ones, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries, new parishes in Malta and Gozo were established.

The Council of Trent (1545-63), whose major objectives were the suppression of Protestantism in Catholic Europe and the reformation of the Catholic Church, led to the establishment in Malta of another ecclesiastical institution. This was the Inquisition, a tribunal which was empowered by the Church in Rome to deal with cases concerning offences against the Catholic faith and the Church's teachings (Ciappara 2001: 145; Cassar 2002). The Inquisitor, as an Apostolic delegate, had the authority to interrogate those who were accused of black magic, witchcraft, sorcery, simony, heresy, amongst others (Buttigieg 2003: 17-18). The office of the Inquisitor was established in 1574 at Birgu. Sentences varied from minor penalties to imprisonment and execution, although the latter was not common (Bonnici 1990; 1992). The tribunal of the Inquisition was abolished in 1798 with the Order's expulsion from Malta. The Inquisition, like the local Church, possessed various estates spread in different parts of the islands, which it leased to tenant farmers (Figure 2.12).

Thus, from the second half of the 16th century Malta became, at least technically, a theocratic state, since the Grand Master, the Bishop and the Inquisitor all fell under the authority of the Roman papacy. The three highest institutions of the country had their own tribunals, prisons and administrative regimes. For example, court cases that involved the Knights or the common people were usually heard by the Order's tribunal, which was also the country's civil court, while those concerning the behaviour of priests or clerics were generally treated by the Bishop's tribunal. The Inquisitor's tribunal was more concerned with cases that involved non-conformity with the Church's teachings (Ciappara 2001: 262, 473).

Until 1565 the Order considered the Maltese islands as a temporary base since it had still in mind the recapturing of Rhodes. Therefore, in the first thirty-five years of their rule in Malta the Knights did not embark on large-scale projects, even though they were aware of the islands' weak defensive system and that Sciberras peninsula, on which Valletta was eventually built, had to be fortified (Blouet 1993: 50-51). To make matters worse, in 1551 the Order lost the Castle of Tripoli and a few days later Gozo suffered an unexpected incursion by a Turkish armada which depopulated the whole island (Cutajar and Cassar 1985: 30). Nevertheless, the Knights carried out extensive consolidation work on the *Castrum Maris* which was upgraded to a modern fortress (renamed into Fort St. Angelo) and built two new fortresses, one at the tip of Sciberras peninsula (named Fort St. Elmo) and the other at L'Isola (named Fort St. Michael), on the south-west of Birgu, where the town of Senglea was established (Spiteri 1994: 261-69) (Figure 2.22). These defensive systems were tested in 1565, when the Maltese islands were once again the main target of the Ottoman enemy.

The defeat of the Turkish armada in Malta and then in Lepanto (1571) forced the Ottoman Empire to pull back its forces from the central Mediterranean (Sire 1994: 68-72). The Great Siege led the Knights to forget all about Rhodes and make Malta their

permanent residence; for the Maltese this signified the start of a modern era, during which the country prospered economically, socially and culturally.

Starting with the building of Valletta in the Grand Harbour, as the Order's first ambitious project of a new fortified city in Malta, the second phase of the Knights period is characterized by a massive building programme of defensive systems in different parts of the islands. By the late 18th century the Order had fortified most of the Grand Harbour and built various coastal fortifications and watch-towers (Figures 2.13 (a) and (b)). The walls of the old medieval castles (Mdina and the Gozo Castello) were rebuilt or restored. On Comino they built a coastal tower to guard better the channel between the two main islands (Spiteri 1994: 273-75). These large scale projects developed the islands into a military base and brought into the country a sense of security among the local people (Buttigieg 2003: 11). A number of villages that had been temporarily abandoned due to the imminent 1565 Turkish attack were repopulated and flourished, while new ones were established (Blouet 1993: 78) (section 2.3.4 below). In 1571 the Order transferred its seat of administration from Birgu to Valletta which became the centre of Malta's political, economic and cultural life (Freller 2010: 157). Here, the Order built its main palaces, churches, residences and government offices (Figure 2.14). During this period Valletta, Birgu and the other harbour settlements that developed from the second half of the 16th century onwards became the maritime hub of the Maltese islands, in which various commercial as well as ship building and repairing activities were carried out. The expansion of trade and commercial contacts with the outside world led to more diplomatic relations with different countries, with various consulates being established between the second half of the 16th and the late 18th century to safeguard the interest of foreign businessmen in Malta (Greene 2002: 50; Buttigieg 2003: 14-15) (section 2.3.3 below).

The population of the islands increased from about 20,000 in 1530 to approximately 98,000 in 1798 which means that, despite cases of famine, epidemics and warfare, there was a general demographic rise of about 390% (Blouet 1993: 80). Apart from the post-1565 baby boom, which was triggered by the post-siege society enjoying peace and prosperity, the islands attracted a number of migrants from different countries to settle here (Borg 2003: 73). When Gozo also became a safer place and pirate raids diminished, many families decided to settle there. Therefore, from an almost deserted place Gozo became a well-populated island with its own settlements and parishes. The maritime urban settlements were the ones to experience the largest demographic growth since they were a source of employment for many Maltese (Cini 2003: 84). However Mdina, having lost its previous status and role, suffered a demographic decline, so much so that by the late 16th century half of its houses were uninhabited, and by 1716 there were hardly more than a hundred permanent residents living there (Mallia Milanes 1993: 18). By the early 17th century the maritime urban centres experienced a huge demographic rise; in Valletta alone, there were about 11,000 inhabitants (including the Knights), almost as much as the Three Cities (Birgu, Senglea and Cospicua) put together. Local demographic estimates demonstrate that in the early 17th century Birgu had a population of about 3,100 persons, Senglea a population of 4,000, while in Bormla there were about 2,800 people (Blouet 1993: 74).

Valletta thus developed into a cosmopolitan centre in which people from different social strata, locals and foreigners, made the new city their source of employment as well as their permanent place of residence. The villages continued to flourish while several others became parishes, however their population growth was slower and less aggressive (Blouet 1993: 79-81; Cassar 1997: 141). It is estimated that by 1798 about 45% of the total local population was living in the urban settlements of Valletta, Senglea, Birgu, Cospicua and Floriana (Blouet 1993: 73). Due to the limited carrying capacity of the Maltese islands (that is, the population that can be supported indefinitely upon the available resources of a region or country), estimated at around 18,000 inhabitants (Said-Zammit 1997a: 41-42), this rise in local population from the 17th century onwards made the demand for local agricultural products unsustainable (Cassar 2000: 29-30). As a result, the local demand on imported wheat and other agricultural products, especially from Sicily, increased. At the same time, the local villages had to become more specialised in the production of cash crops which found their place on the international market, for example cotton, to balance the country's economy (Cassar 2000: 31). This process of urbanization contrasts with the situation that prevailed in the previous period in which, according to late medieval population estimates, about 75% of the local population was living in the islands' rural areas and only 25% lived in the urban centres (Fiorini 1993a: 122-26) (Figure 2.11).

The Knights, apart from having been professionally trained soldiers, were also hospitallers. Since the Crusades the Order of St. John ran several hospitals to attend the sick. In Malta the Knights established their first hospital in Birgu, but then built a new one in Valletta. Through time they also opened other medical and charitable institutions; a medical school was opened in the 17th century, which later came to form part of the University of Malta.

The Order of St. John was expelled from the Maltese islands by the French when General Napoleon Bonaparte occupied them in 1798. Its expulsion from Malta meant that for a relatively long time the Order ended up once again homeless, as had happened in 1523. After having resided for a short period in Messina, Catania and Ferrara, in 1834 the Order of St. John settled in Rome, where it still owns, with extraterritorial status, the Magistral Palace in Via Condotti and the Magistral Villa on the Aventine Hill.

2.3.2 The social organization, class structure and the quality of life

One of the Knights's aims, when they settled in Birgu and also later, in Valletta, was to create a *collachio*, an area reserved only for the professed members of the Order and other authorized persons. In Birgu this was a partial success, but in Valletta this idea did not materialize. Apart from the many peasant families who left their villages to settle in the maritime urban settlements from the second half of the 16th century onwards, there was also a substantial community of foreign migrants, particularly in Valletta. These developments led to the evolution of a new urban society in which people from all walks of life, foreigners and locals, nobles and commoners as well as priests and civilians, interacted to conduct different activities, resolve issues, and

conclude agreements. The sense of interdependence that an urban environment normally entails meant that in Valletta class segregation could not be fully achieved according to the Order's original plans. This new cosmopolitan environment brought a shift from an introverted society, in which the majority of the people lived as peasants in various villages and hamlets, to an extrovert society, in which almost half of the local population lived in an urbanized multicultural setting, in settlements that were regularly in contact with people of different nationalities, cultures and languages (Cassar 2000: 95-120). In this context the Maltese language, though retaining its strong Semitic element, gradually became more influenced by Italian and Sicilian. The official languages of the administration were French and Italian, while the Church and the Inquisition still adhered to Latin as their official means of communication (Aquilina 1981: 58). There is evidence that, while the notaries still made use of Sicilian and Italian for drafting their contracts, occasionally they employed Maltese terminology when referring to certain architectural features or parts of a building, which suggests that the Maltese language was also used by some members of the legal profession. There are also indications that during this period the Maltese language, though still extensively used by the common people, became also a medium of communication for a number of intellectuals who composed poems in it (Friggieri 1987). The eighteenth-century historian Agius De Soldanis (1746: 30) notes that, while the common people living in the harbour area spoke in Maltese with each other, they used Italian to communicate with foreigners.

The Church, particularly through its parishes, influenced its members from the cradle to the grave. The parish priest was responsible for the spiritual needs of his flock as well as for the collection of Church tithes. In the villages, he was considered as the leading citizen who was often sought by the parishioners, many of whom were illiterate, to give advice on various issues (Ciappara 2005: 338). Besides the diocesan clergy, the religious orders gradually opened more convents in the maritime urban centres, while other new religious societies, for example the Jesuits, established their homes in Malta from the late 16th century onwards. Gozo remained under two parishes until the second half of the 17th century, when the first parish outside Rabat and the Citadel was established in 1678. The life of the faithful depended not only on their daily bread, but essentially also on the Church's teachings and traditions. It was expected from the faithful to observe all religious feasts and to avoid meat and dairy products during certain parts of the year (Buttigieg 2003: 17-18). The church bells usually served as time-tellers; the *Pater Noster* (Our Father) at 4.00 am marked the start of a new working day, while the *Angelus* (a popular Marian prayer) and the *Salutazione dei Defunti* (a prayer for the dead) in the evening signalled the return of the peasants to their home (Ciappara 2001: 7). The people, both nobles and commoners, were encouraged to donate money, land and real estate property to the Church so much so that through time this institution accumulated huge material wealth. They were also expected to contribute in kind for the maintenance and upkeep of the parish church.

Family values were strictly regulated. Although men and women were considered as equal human beings, there was certainly no gender equality insofar as family life was concerned. Once married, a woman's duty was to bear children and manage the

household. High and upper middle class women were not expected to carry out any work outside the house, to follow a profession or take up any public office. But the poverty and misery in which many local families lived, especially when the husband died at a young age or was away from Malta for a long time, forced many low class women to seek employment outside the house to work as servants, sellers, hawkers, or else to work in the fields (Buttigieg 2003: 98-111).

A married woman had to submit herself to the authority of her husband, together with the children and any other persons who may have lived within the same household. Particularly among the well-off, the husband was considered as the family's breadwinner as well as the person who conducted all economic activities outside the house (Scicluna 2008: 66-69). It was his duty to look after his wife and children and to safeguard his wife's integrity. Among the destitute the situation was different, particularly when poor married women and widows had to work outside their house to earn money.

Since life expectancy was not high, even if it fared much better than in other European countries, a twenty to twenty-two year old woman was usually considered as fit for marriage (Ciappara 2001: 18-25; 2014: 103-108). Marriage was a pre-arranged relationship, often considered by the elite as an alliance between two families. It was not a partnership that expressed love and affection between a man and a woman, but a relationship through which women found a sense of security, protection and economic subsistence (Borg 2003: 51).

According to the Church, marriage was a sacrament and was, therefore, indissoluble until death. Moreover, marriage proposals between two partners of a different social position were highly discouraged (Cassar 1993: 464). As a result, this was also a symbol of status and economic wealth; evidence of this comes from the numerous dowries that were contracted by notaries during this period, which throw light on different social classes.

Religious devotion was manifested in the annual village feasts which brought the community to pray and celebrate together. The faithful were also expected to observe all other obligatory religious feasts, like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost (see discussion in more detail in Chapter 6 below). Perhaps the greatest manifestation of this Catholic devotion is confirmed by the large number of churches that were built in every parish. During this period several village parish churches were rebuilt on a much grander scale to dominate the town or village centre (Thake 1994: 45). The building of so many lavish parish churches in the proto-urban villages during this period, compared to the simpler and smaller late medieval churches, possibly points to a shift in the level of material wealth within the rural society. Various parish records demonstrate that these churches were often built through the generosity of those who not only donated money or property to the Church, but probably also their services, for example stonemasons, carpenters and labourers (Bezzina 1989: 25; Ciappara 2014: 239-47; Charles Dalli 2014: personal communication). Well-off benefactors who contributed financially to the building of these churches included bishops, priests, knights and members of the local nobility. For example, the parish church of Żejtun was built through the financial support of the noble Gregorio Bonnici who lived in the same

locality. This demonstrates that many of these village parish churches were primarily built through the influence of the elite, including the rural well-off. However, the support of those who offered their manual work cannot be ignored, because although the elite could financially afford to commission these projects, it was often through the hard labour of the other villagers that such churches could be built. To an extent this also shows a certain degree of pride among the village community to make the parish church the settlement's centre of attraction as well as a symbol of collective identity. These churches indicate a trend towards an improved standard of living, particularly among the rural elite, which allowed the rural community to emulate urban architecture and aspects of town life (section 2.3.3 below). Therefore, in these villages the parish church also became a symbol of economic power and social status.

This period saw the establishment of three important educational institutions: the Jesuits' College (*Collegium Melitense*) which was established in Valletta in 1592 to provide a high quality education and confer degrees, the University of Malta the endowments of which formerly pertained to the Jesuits who were expelled from Malta in 1760, and the medical school. Some of the religious orders as well as village or town priests offered basic education too, particularly religious instruction, but there were no compulsory education or established curricula. Therefore most of the people, particularly the peasants, remained illiterate. An analysis carried out by Borg (2003: 135) revealed that in the mid-17th century almost 70% of the inhabitants of Valletta were illiterate, which is a fair reflection of the general level of literacy in other parts of Europe. Those who could afford to study at University were able to specialize mainly in law, theology or medicine, while others sought tuition at a foreign university, for example in Sicily or mainland Italy. Although illiteracy was rampant especially among the lower classes of society, and education was only available to the socially privileged, exceptions and cases of social mobility were sometimes also possible. The eighteenth-century Maltese lawyer Nicola Muscat, who is depicted in a painting conserved in a private collection, is an example of a person who hailed from a poor family, but through hardship managed to receive a good education and eventually joined the local professional community. Muscat lost his parents when he was still very young and was raised by his poor aunt who, through her hard work and financial means, supported him to finish his formal education and become a lawyer (Figure 2.15).

Although the Knights put emphasis on health and established hospitals as well as other medical and charitable institutions to attend the sick, outbreaks of epidemics, like those of 1590 and 1676, sometimes hit the islands and claimed thousands of victims (Cassar 1993: 453-54; Freller 2010: 158). The first areas to be severely affected were usually the maritime urban centres, being the most densely populated on the island. Here, many lower class families lived in single-room dwellings or cellars, often without any proper ventilation (section 2.3.4 below). Because of the poor and overcrowded habitation quarters that developed in certain parts of these towns during the 17th and 18th centuries, coupled with the lack of awareness regarding personal hygiene, especially among the lower class community, it was no surprise that contagious diseases spread like wildfire (Fiorini 1993b: 305; Ciappara 2001: 16). Malnutrition was usually the cause of premature death, especially among children who were weak and

poorly developed. Historical records show that smallpox and other diseases claimed up to half the child population before they reached puberty (Cassar 1993: 449).

The social and economic circumstances that Malta experienced during this period led to the development of a more complex, highly segmented class structure. The local society was divided as follows:

a) **the elite**: these were the people who had the highest authority or influence in the country:
   i. the Knights: these were the sovereign rulers of the Maltese islands. The Grand Master, his Council and all the other administrative bodies of the Order constituted the government of the country. Like any other sovereign government, the Order had legislative, administrative as well as judicial powers over all its subjects, with the exception of priests and the staff of the Inquisition, who were subject to the authority of the Bishop and the Inquisitor, respectively. The Order was also the major land and property owner of the islands, besides its vast overseas land properties. It is estimated that in the Maltese islands the Knights possessed approximately 30% of the total land (Caruana 2009: 8-9). The Order was also the country's major employer; besides the many employees it hired in its military, naval, medical and administrative service, its local farm estates were cultivated by peasants and farm labourers;
   ii. the Church and the Inquisition: these were the second and the third highest authorities of the country, respectively. The local Church had its own hierarchical organization, starting from the Bishop and the Cathedral Chapter at the top to the priests, friaries and nunneries at the bottom. The Inquisitor, apart from hearing cases related to the Catholic faith, was also the Pope's delegate in the country. Both institutions had various landed possessions spread in various parts of the islands, which they rented out to village labourers and peasants (about 19% of the total land in Malta) (Scicluna 2008: 26-28);
   iii. the nobility: this group lost all the privileges they enjoyed in the Medieval Period to hold top government positions. However, noble families remained major landowners and were a source of employment for many landless peasants and village labourers whom they hired as tenant farmers or herdsmen (the nobility owned approximately 13% of the total land) (Caruana 2009: 13-14; Vassallo 2008: 23). Although a section of the local nobility continued to specialize in the cotton trade and production, other noble families decided to move to Valletta for different business opportunities. In 1530 the Knights reaffirmed most of the titles and fiefs of the local late medieval nobility, however the Order granted new fiefdoms to families that were loyal to this organization through military or financial support;
   iv. the diplomatic corps: consuls and diplomats of different countries and kingdoms were established in Malta, particularly in Valletta, to look after

the needs of their fellow compatriots, especially those involved in the local business community (Cassar 2000: 91);

b) **the middle class**: these were people who provided different services or skilled labour. This class included different groups:
   i. the professional community: this consisted of lawyers, notaries, legal procurators, surgeons, physicians, pharmacists and men of letters. They lived mostly in Valletta and the Three Cities, although it was possible to find doctors who lived in the major villages. Those in the medical profession, such as doctors and surgeons, usually worked in the Order's hospitals, while lawyers and legal experts practised their profession in the local tribunals;
   ii. the civil service: this included all those who worked in the government departments, performing various clerical and accounting duties;
   iii. the business community: it comprised businessmen, merchants, entrepreneurial farmers, bankers, licensed corsairs, middlemen, retailers, amongst others. These were particularly active in Valletta, Birgu and Senglea;
   iv. the military and naval: this group included all those who worked with the Order's military and naval service, for example sailors, officers, soldiers, bombardiers and sergeants;
   v. artisans and skilled labourers: many craftsmen had their workshop in the maritime urban centres, while others worked in the major villages. Most of the skilled labourers worked in the shipyards, on the Order's galleys or in the building and quarrying industry (middle class families occupied about 18% of the total land in Malta and Gozo) (Caruana 2009: 8-9), and

c) **the lower class**: this comprised the following groups:
   i. the peasantry and unskilled labourers: the former were divided into two groups: the landed peasantry (who occupied about 20% of the total land) (Caruana 2009: 31) and the landless farmers. These lived in the villages and hamlets, with their livelihood depending on land cultivation and animal breeding. With these should be added the fishermen. Unskilled labourers lived in the urban or rural settlements, often depending on the nature of their employment;
   ii. the slaves and the destitute: there were domestic slaves, while others worked on the Order's galleys or on the farm estates. This class also included beggars, prostitutes and fortune tellers.

The rise of a commercial middle class, particularly from the late 16th century onwards, became the cornerstone of Malta's expanding trade in the period following the Great Siege (for a more detailed discussion see section 2.3.3 below). The development of this new influential class was in line with the Order's national strategy to urbanize the islands, and the more the Order became politically powerful on the island, the more this new commercial community expanded (Cassar 2000: 91-92). The effect of urbanization also affected the lifestyle of many Maltese who migrated from their villages to the new thriving maritime centres.

Like elsewhere in early modern Europe, the family that prevailed in Malta during the Knights period, especially in the urban settlements, was of the nuclear type. The kind of employment that the urban inhabitants carried out in the maritime towns meant that the family no longer required several children to help their parents, as was the tendency among the rural community (Buttigieg 2003: 93-95). However, the entrepreneurial economy that developed in the maritime centres during the 17th century brought fathers, sons, nephews, uncles and even sons-in-law to pool their resources in the form of capital, trading vessels, storerooms, or anything else related to this flourishing commercial activity. Therefore, although historical records confirm that during this period there was an increase in the number of nuclear households in Valletta and the Three Cities, in practice kinship ties remained as strong as ever (Buttigieg 2003: 111). The late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century urbanization of the Grand Harbour area brought a dichotomy between the urban and rural culture. Those living in the towns, particularly the elite and the high middle class, usually kept themselves abreast with current issues and trends in Europe, but the villagers generally remained socially more isolated, being mainly interested in their daily activities and in the introverted village community (Cassar 1993: 471-72; 2000: 140-46). This is clearly manifested in the quality of life (for example, in the people's diet, dress code and lifestyle), which characterized the different social classes during this period.

One of the indicators of the quality of life is a person's diet. For example, as a staple commodity bread represented a status symbol that defined human condition and class according to its particular colour. Dark bread made from barley was cheaper and usually reserved for lower class families (Cassar 1993: 448). The diet of the lower classes was generally simple and consisted mainly of vegetables and bread supplemented by oil and cheese. Meat, fish and wine were consumed on special occasions during the year. The elite and the upper middle class, enjoying a better standard of living, followed a more elaborate diet, consisting mainly of pasta, meat and vegetables; they also consumed locally produced or imported wine (Cassar 2000: 77). In the absence of meat, they consumed fresh or salted fish. Common meat products included chicken and pork. The low salary that an average labourer earned during this period meant that a large part of a person's income had to be spent on staple commodities, especially bread, and very little remained to spend on products other than food.

The dress code distinguished the elite from the rest of the people. The upper classes usually dressed according to the latest fashions in Europe, but the villagers, labourers and servants were clearly identified by their simple garments, generally influenced by Sicilian and South Italian vernacular styles. From the collections of the Folklore Museum in Gozo and through other private collections it was possible to observe that the villager's costume remained the same from one generation to another; crude homespun seems to have been the peasant's everyday working garb which was made from wool or cotton (Cassar 1993: 449-50). The ethnic faldetta (or *għonnella*), the traditional woman's hooded cloak, was also a clear indicator of a woman's social status; while the ladies wore *għenienel* (plural of *għonnella*) made of fine quality fabric, village women had to do with less elaborate ones. For particular occasions, for example

a wedding or an appointment with a lawyer, the commoners put on their special outfits, which even in this case still distinguished them from the elite.

Another important symbol of the quality of life is the house, including its furniture and contents. The elite could afford to live in comfortable houses and palaces characterized by spacious rooms, fine quality furniture, elaborate furnishings and wall paintings. Comparable to what happened elsewhere in Europe during this period, wealthy families, including the Knights, usually lived in the town centre along its main streets, while the lower urban classes lived in poorer dwellings in the outskirts (Sabelberg 1986: 60; Borg 2003: 31-32, 133). The elite could often afford to have a second home, built either on their estates or in one of the major villages. These houses were sometimes elaborate and included, apart from the spacious rooms, a private garden. An elite family which travelled from the town to its country house required some means of transport, for instance a horse drawn carriage to carry its personal belongings and, sometimes, also a portable altar on which the priest could celebrate private mass.

The houses of the commoners were generally characterized by more restricted spaces, often consisting of single-room dwellings or cellars, where it was more difficult for family members to enjoy individual privacy. This also meant that certain rooms were probably multifunctional. Mid-seventeenth-century parish documents show that about 35% of the Valletta inhabitants were living in cellars or in houses with less than four rooms. The majority (about 44%) of the residents dwelt in houses that had between four and six rooms, while the remaining 21%, which presumably comprised the elite and the upper middle class, lived in houses which had more than six rooms. In the absence of more detailed demographic data, and considering that by the mid-17th century almost half of the local population lived in the Harbour area, particularly in Valletta (Mallia Milanes 1993: 15-16), these estimates provide us with a likely picture of how the local class structure was divided, at least in the urban context, with almost one third of the urban population living in poor conditions (see analysis in Chapter 9).

According to the mid-seventeenth-century Inquisitor Borromeo, the situation in Birgu was even worse, because he noted that there were 1,500 single-room dwellings or cellars inhabited by the urban poor (or about 50% of the total Birgu population) (Buttigieg 2003: 42).

Many of these were rented dwellings, the rate of which varied according to locality (Buttigieg 2003: 41-44). In the maritime urban centres it was also common to partition large houses into smaller units to accommodate more families. This situation where many lower class families lived in poor housing conditions was also common in other European countries, for example France (Cassar 2000: 248; Beik 1985; 2009: 287). In the villages and remote rural areas most of the peasant families lived in small houses, while others dwelt in cave-dwellings, in which sanitary conditions were poor. Apart from lack of ventilation and air circulation, there were no proper drainage systems and adequate lighting.

The artistic evidence and the notarial records show that other important indicators of the quality of life are the house furniture and its contents. Contrary to what occurred in the Medieval period, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century elite houses were usually

characterized by more pieces of furniture to include a parlour and a dining room, comparable to what occurred in other parts of Europe. Apart from that, the furniture, furnishings and tableware recorded in notarial contracts were generally imported and of a fine quality. Canvas paintings, generally depicting family portraits or landscapes, decorated the walls of these houses. Conversely, the houses of working class families often included little furniture, and the few available items were often of a simple type. Some basic furniture items included a table, some chairs and a bed. The walls of these houses were kept void of any decorations or furnishings, and the few items that embellished them consisted of a cross or an icon representing a holy figure (see analysis in Chapter 8).

As far as the major villages are concerned, our evidence has revealed that the emulation of urban architecture (for example, the parish churches and townlike houses) as well as the economic changes that these experienced to become proto-industrial settlements, particularly from the late 16th/early 17th century onwards, influenced the way the villagers lived, particularly the rural elite who, given their social and economic position, could be identified from their dress, diet, house type and house contents (Ciappara 2014: 32-35; see discussion in more detail in Chapter 4 below). The rural elite could also afford to follow a lifestyle comparable to that of their urban counterparts.

Our historical evidence, therefore, suggests that during this period the local economy was becoming more urbanized at the disadvantage of the urban poor, who generally lived in substandard accommodation. It also demonstrates that the economic changes that occurred in the major villages during this period made the situation rather different, with the poor probably living in comparatively better conditions than their urban counterparts. Thus, it seems that poverty among the urban poor was substantially more critical than among the poor peasant community.

One final point to be made in this section concerns art, architecture and culture. The legacy of the Order in Malta is still manifested in almost every part of the island. Examples of Baroque art and architecture, the style introduced by the Knights in the early 17th century through foreign artists and architects, are still visible in all parts of the country, mainly through the churches, *palazzi* and lavish houses which were built between the 17th and 18th centuries. With these should be added the various state-of-the-art fortifications and watch towers that were built to protect these islands against the enemy. The sumptuous parish churches, including the Mdina Cathedral, that were built during this period confirm that even the local Church was an avid contributor to the development of local art and architecture (Figures 2.16 and 2.17).

Some of the local traditions that have survived find their origins in the Knights' period. The Carnival has been celebrated on these islands since the 15th century, but became more popular during the Knights' period. Another popular tradition is the village feast (*festa*), which still forms an integral part of the country's national identity (Koster 1984: 185-86; Ciappara 2008: 691). A still surviving popular tradition also dating back to this period is the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (locally known as *l-Imnarja*).

2.3.3 The economy

Reference has already been made to the shift which took place in Malta from the late 16th century from an agriculturally based economy to one which was more commercially oriented. The new city of Valletta was the Order's seat of government and the country's main economic centre. The maritime urban settlements (Valletta, Birgu, Senglea and Bormla) converted the Grand Harbour into the most thriving and cosmopolitan area of the Maltese islands. This new economic situation continued to widen the gap between the conservative rural community and the progressive urban society, the latter consisting mainly of foreign and local migrants who came to work and live in the towns (Cassar 1993: 471-72). Although culturally different, these two communities remained economically interdependent, because while the peasants needed the town dwellers to sell their products to (mainly animals and crops), the latter needed these products for daily consumption (Vassallo 2008: 56, 71).

Despite this shift in economic trends, the internal migration from the villages to the Grand Harbour towns as well as the increasing presence of foreign migrants in the urban settlements, agriculture still remained one of the main pillars of the local economy, serving both the villages and the towns. Apart from the cultivation of cereals, fruits and vines, mainly for local consumption, the major farm estates continued to specialize intensively, at a proto-industrialization level, in cotton production for exportation. In the 18th century this industry became highly regulated to safeguard the interests of the local market (Blouet 1993: 111). Cotton found its way in various European markets, mainly Sicily, Italy, France and Spain (Thomson 2005: 703). In the second half of the 18th century the production of the Maltese cotton showed its first signs of economic decline, when local cotton failed to compete with cheaper products within the international market. By 1800 this local product lost completely its market place and its cultivation diminished, although it did not die out completely (Blouet 1993: 112). With an increasing population, the local crop production was not enough to meet the local demand therefore the Order had to import various food products, including grain, from Sicily or from its European estates (Blouet 1993: 122-23). In the major villages it was also possible to find a tavern or two as well as some shops that provided basic products, for example meat and bread. As occurred in the Medieval period, in the villages there were usually some craftsmen as well, for example a carpenter, a tinsmith or a blacksmith (Buttigieg 2003: 27).

Among the animals that feature in our local historical records, farmers reared cattle, sheep, goats, mules, donkeys and horses, amongst others. While the latter three were used for transport and military purposes, the others were important for the production of milk, cheese, meat and fat (Caruana 2009: 44-46). There were peasants who had their own herds, while others were employed as tenant herdsmen.

The fishing industry, although economically less important than agriculture, was another source of employment, which every day brought quantities of fresh fish to the town markets, especially in Valletta (Ciappara 2001: 17-18). There is historical evidence that in the mid-17th century fishermen lived not only in the villages, but also in the maritime towns (Borg 2003: 111; Busuttil 2003: 47).

The building of Valletta brought with it new employment opportunities, especially in the quarrying and building industries. The construction of fortifications, palaces, churches and other buildings certainly engaged a large number of stonemasons and quarrymen (Blouet 1993: 109-10; Mula 2000: 91). However, the Order also managed its civil service and tribunals, the galley squadron, the arsenal, the hospitals and the state-owned industries (for example, the gunpowder factory, the foundry and the bakery) (Mallia Milanes 1993: 27-32; Mercieca 2009: 108). These required many employees, including professional and skilled workers as well as labourers, to perform a wide variety of duties, for instance legal procurators, clerks, accountants, sailors, rowers, cooks, military personnel, master craftsmen and blacksmiths. For its hospitals the Order hired doctors, pharmacists, surgeons and nurses.

Trading contacts with the outside world became more extensive. Regular commercial links were developed with Sicily, Italy, France and Spain, and eventually also with North Africa (Tripoli, Tunis and Morocco) and Turkey (Cutajar 1987: 45-46; Testa 1989: 143-44, 316).

Since the Maltese islands lacked various natural resources, with the exception of local limestone, the Order had to import certain raw materials, for example wood for ship building. The local business community was a source of employment for many labourers who were required to manage the warehouses or to work as cargo handlers. A community of Maltese merchants was spread all over Europe, particularly in France, Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, where they occasionally established trading companies to consolidate their commercial links with the Maltese islands. The products imported to Malta included ricotta, milk, cheese, wine, wheat, animals and coal. English merchants imported a variety of products, for example Manchester cloth, dried codfish and soap, while Greek businessmen brought tobacco, flour, wood for ship construction and rice (Ciappara 2001: 46-50, 182-84, 224-25). Another category of businessmen that cropped up in Valletta to provide different financial services consisted of private bankers and money lenders (Mallia Milanes 1993: 27-29).

Licensed *corso* (piracy) continued to be a major contributor to the local economy. In the 17th century this was highly organized and was regulated by the *Magistrato degli Armamenti*, established in 1605 (Cutajar 1987: 37-40). Maltese privateers built their galleys specifically for this trade, and it is estimated that there were about twenty to thirty *corso* vessels each year during the 17th century. The Grand Harbour was a thriving centre for Maltese pirates, employing about 4,000 men. Privateering in Malta declined considerably by the early 18th century due to the changing political situation in Europe and the Mediterranean and the consequent political ties the Order had established with other nations, for example Turkey, Venice, Morocco, Tunis and Tripoli (Testa 1989: 96-97, 143-44; Greene 2002: 63; Mallia Milanes 2003: 70-71).

In the maritime urban centres there was also a thriving community of artisans, which included blacksmiths, coppersmiths, tinsmiths, clock makers, carpenters and tailors (Ciappara 2001: 378; Borg 2003: 118). In addition to these there were also bakers, rope makers, shoe repairers, barbers and shopkeepers. Along the streets of Valletta many hawkers sold a plethora of different goods and food products, for example fish, vegetables and grain (Mallia Milanes 1993: 25; Ciappara 2001: 212-24).

Another important contributor to Malta's economy, which developed from the 17th century onwards, was entrepot trade (Vassallo 2001: 21). Historical records demonstrate that by the 18th century this type of trade was already well-established in the country, with the islands serving mainly as a transhipment base between the eastern and western Mediterranean as well as between North Africa and southern Europe. The products mentioned in our historical records that were regularly transhipped through Malta included cotton, grain, various food products, spices and other goods (Vassallo 2011: 114). Entrepot trade generated profits to the local business community as well as employment opportunities to many Maltese.

The economic growth and the new economic patterns that characterized this period propelled an urbanization process which turned the Grand Harbour area into an important centre of a cash economy; it was the centre of minting, exchange, trade and manufacture (Cassar 2000: 100-10). The urban settlements served military, naval and administrative purposes as well as an economic link between the rural life and the outside world. By 1650 the maritime urban centres, particularly Valletta, had already become the focus of the whole system of local settlements (Blouet 1978: 194; 1993: 76).

2.3.4 The settlements

The economic changes that characterized the Maltese islands during this period (see previous section) had an indelible effect on the inhabitants and their culture as well as on settlement evolution, particularly from the late 16th century onwards. This period includes two main phases of settlement evolution: the phase between 1530 and 1565 (characterized by the Knights' reluctance to occupy these islands on a permanent basis) and the phase between 1566 and 1798 (a time of political and economic stability, with Malta becoming the Order's permanent home). During this phase the islands prospered in terms of population size and economic activity, and also in terms of settlement evolution.

2.3.4.1 The phase 1530-1565

Although Charles V of Spain donated the Maltese islands to the Order of St. John in perpetuity, the Knights still considered the possibility of reconquering Rhodes, which they had occupied since the early 14th century. The Knights' main concern about Malta and Gozo was the poor state of the fortifications (Vella 1984: 185). If the Maltese islands were perhaps to become their permanent home the existing defensive systems had to be heavily restored, while new ones had to be built (Sire 1994: 63).

During this period there was also a shift of political power from Mdina to Birgu, because the old medieval town was located away from the harbour, and therefore could not meet the Order's naval and administrative requirements. The establishment of the Order in Birgu, sheltered as it was by the *Castrum Maris*, led this urban settlement to experience a change in its townscape and a sudden rise in population, to become the most important administrative and commercial centre on the island (Fiorini in Bugeja, Buhagiar and Fiorini 1993: 224-26; Bezzina 2001: 17, 24).

The fortifications that the Knights built during this phase due to the increasing threat of an Ottoman invasion had considerable influence on local settlement development. For instance, the Order's decision to settle in Birgu in 1530 generated more employment opportunities, a sense of security and more building activity, which converted this village into a thriving urban centre. Figure 2.18 shows an old print of how Birgu probably looked like in 1565. When compared to Quintin's description and map (Figure 1.6), this illustration suggests that, by 1565, Birgu had probably become more populated and was also characterized by more residences.

In addition, behind the walls of Fort St. Michael a new settlement, Senglea, named after its founder Grand Master La Sengle, was established after 1541. One of the objectives of this settlement was to ease over-population in the neighbouring Birgu (Spiteri 1994: 267). Senglea was, therefore, the first settlement that was built by the Knights of St. John in Malta and which did not follow the traditional streetscape and morphology of existing local settlements with narrow, winding streets. The new town was instead characterized by a rectilinear street plan imitating that of several other military towns in contemporary Europe (Tonna 1985: 31; Hughes 1993: 487) (Figure 2.19).

Although Mdina lost its previous political power, it continued to dominate the villages of western Malta and offer shelter to their inhabitants in times of peril. The northern district remained largely uninhabited. At a time when an Ottoman invasion on the islands seemed imminent, especially in 1564 and 1565, Malta experienced the gradual abandonment of several settlements (Blouet 1993: 54). Many inhabitants fled to the fortified centres, particularly Birgu and Senglea, to live in a more secure place (Attard 1995: 28) (Figure 2.20).

The medieval citadel of Gozo remained the only fortified settlement on that island. During this phase the Knights restored its walls which were in a poor state (Spiteri 1994: 318). Gozo was almost completely depopulated in 1551 after it had been raided by a Turkish armada (Blouet 1993: 52) (Figure 2.21).

Thus the pattern that emerges during this phase is characterized by the increasing importance of Birgu and by the decline of Mdina's prestige and political control. Birgu's importance was reinforced by the establishment of a town nearby (Senglea). The years close to the Great Siege were marked by the further abandonment of several rural settlements, whose inhabitants sought protection in or immediately near the fortified towns. After the 1551 incursion most of Gozo remained largely depopulated until the late 16th century (Figure 2.22).

2.3.4.2 The phase 1565-1798

This phase is marked by the consolidation of the Knights' occupation of the Maltese islands. During these 233 years, particularly from the early 17th century onwards, when enemy and pirate attacks became more sporadic, these islands prospered both demographically and economically (Blouet 1993: 102-25). Moreover, the Order financed the building of new fortifications and watchtowers in different parts of the island. Those that had suffered during the Great Siege were either restored or rebuilt.

In 1566 the Order embarked on the building of a new fortified city, Valletta. It was built on Sciberras peninsula, where Fort St. Elmo is located, on the opposite side of the Grand Harbour. The city lies between two harbours: the Grand Harbour on the right and Marsamxett Harbour on the left. By the late 16th and early 17th century Valletta came to symbolize the Order's seat of power and also the grandeur of local Baroque art and architecture.

Valletta was built on a strictly rectilinear street plan modelled on other contemporary Renaissance and military towns in Europe (Mahoney 1988: 123; Pollak 1991: 13-54; Bintliff 2014a: 215). Like those of Senglea, the roads of this city are characterized by an uninterrupted straight line of vision. The buildings and houses built in these grid-plan settlements were spread over a number of *insulae*. For example, according to a seventeenth-century map (Figure 2.23 (a)), the buildings and houses of Valletta were spread over seventy-six *insulae*. Most of these *insulae*, each of which contains a number of dwellings, are characterized by a central courtyard, which perhaps had a communal use.

The layout of the new city was designed by the military engineer Francesco Laparelli, but most of the early buildings were planned by the architect Girolamo Cassar. To ensure that all building regulations were adhered to and that every structure was built according to the building permit, the Order established a special commission, the *Officio delle Case*. The main building regulations were:

a) there were to be no projecting stairways or gardens fronting buildings to ensure uniformity within the city streets;
b) when a building plot was purchased works had to start in no more than six months and the house had to be occupied within a year;
c) the commission had to decide the sum of money that was to be spent on the new structure. This money had to be spent within three years. This regulation was specifically intended to ensure that the new building was of a high standard and to limit the main streets of Valletta to those who could afford a *palazzo*;
d) the corners of houses had to be embellished by a coat-of-arms or a statue;
e) all façade works had to be supervised by a master mason;
f) each house had to have a cistern for rainwater storage;
g) each house had to be connected to the sewers which were to be laid beneath the streets;
h) all building stone had to be cut from a nearby quarry site known as the Manderaggio (on the western part of the peninsula);
i) building plots were to be allocated according to the financial means and social status of the buyer (Bosio 1621: 831-32; Blouet 1993: 85-86).

The Order's original idea was to separate its quarters from the rest of the Valletta residents, as occurred in the north Italian city of Turin to segregate the Savoy nobility from the rest of the residents (Pollak 1991). This however did not materialize, because segregation was difficult to achieve in this small city. When the city was built it also had no regular drinking water supply. This problem was solved in the early 17th century when a project commissioned by Grand Master Wignacourt brought drinking water to Valletta through an aqueduct and a system of underground pipes.

Although the building regulations were strict, as happened elsewhere in contemporary European towns and cities, for example Turin (Pollak 1991: 18-25), the sharp rise in population, particularly during the 17th and 18th centuries, led to a higher demand in accommodation. The area originally earmarked for the galley port and arsenal, a project which eventually was abandoned, soon developed into a slum area (known as the Manderaggio), occupied by the poorest inhabitants (Borg 2003: 31-32). Another area in Valletta which developed into poor dwellings was L-Arċipierku (on the western part of Valletta, considered as the heart of St. Paul's parish) (Vassallo 2007: 35). These areas developed along the outskirts of Valletta, and therefore did not affect the original streetscape of its central quarters. To accommodate more families, large houses were sometimes partitioned into smaller units which were sold or rented out.

When compared to the previous map, Figure 2.23 (b), a late eighteenth-century plan of the same city, demonstrates that in a period of about one hundred and fifty years Valletta underwent considerable changes in its town plan. Most notably, the open spaces within the *insulae* were taken up by additional buildings which had different functions. This tendency for towns to increase in population density and lose open space has been observed in various other European early modern cities (Bettencourt 2013: 1438-41). This development in Valletta's town planning, particularly the addition of more dwellings, seems to coincide with the sharp demographic rise (already observed in section 2.3.1 above), which Valletta experienced from the 17th century onwards.

When the demographic situation in Valletta and the Three Cities was no longer sustainable the Order tried to mitigate the problem by encouraging lower class families to settle in other areas of the Maltese islands. For example, in the 17th century the Order developed a new settlement (Paola), about 6 km away from Valletta. The government encouraged these families to settle there under various favourable conditions. A century later the Order established a new suburb just outside the walls of Valletta, called Floriana (or Borgo Vilhena). In addition, it also encouraged many families to repopulate Gozo after it remained largely depopulated after 1551. Some of the incentives that the Order gave to these families included the pardoning of debts and the leasing or renting of government land at reasonable rates (Vassallo 2008: 22).

In terms of settlement evolution, the building of Valletta certainly left an indelible mark which affected this part of Malta until the first half of the 20th century. The building of Valletta and the various employment opportunities that it generated led to an intensive urbanization process in the Harbour district, particularly in the areas close to Valletta and Birgu.

During this period the major rural medieval settlements in Malta, some of which were temporarily depopulated just before the Great Siege, were repopulated and gradually prospered again, however all at their own pace. As a matter of fact, from the last quarter of the 16th century onwards, and particularly during the 17th century, thirteen of these settlements became parishes (Attard, Balzan, Għargħur, Għaxaq, Kirkop, Lija, Luqa, Mqabba, Mosta, Qrendi, Safi, Tarxien and Żabbar), indicating that they had a sizeable population as well as some type of organizational control over the

minor settlements nearby. In fact, all these villages are dominated by massive Baroque parish churches, which emulated their urban counterparts (Tonna 1985: 39).

As in the urban settlements, the village parish church was usually situated in an open square (*pjazza*), normally of an irregular plan, almost in the central part of the village, comparable to what occurred in certain Mediterranean countries, for example Sicily (Tonna 1985: 51). Nonetheless the network of labyrinthine roads surrounding the parish church and the side alleys remained one of the major characteristics of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century village. In the Greek villages, the emulation of urban plans occurs at a relatively later period, once prosperity reached them in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Bintliff 2012a: 375).

Figure 2.24 shows the distribution of settlements in Malta and Gozo just after 1798. It demonstrates that by this time various hamlets had disappeared or were else incorporated into the territorial limits of the nearby major settlements (Blouet 1993: 80). Historical records indicate that many of these hamlets were deserted probably due to economic reasons, where they had become "*too small to support a tavern, a store, a carpenter or a stone mason*" (Blouet 1993: 81). This shift from dispersion to more nucleation of rural settlements, together with the simultaneous migration from the countryside to the urban maritime centres brought about three important phenomena in the local settlement evolution:

a) the desertion of hamlets that were no longer economically sustainable;
b) the expansion of the major villages in locations where the surrounding land allows horizontal spread;
c) the expansion of the maritime urban centres at a relatively fast rate. However, these settlements could not expand horizontally because they were all fortified. As a result to accommodate more families, houses had to be either partitioned or small in size (consisting of one or two rooms) or else multi-storey dwellings built on narrow plots (for example, three or four storey-dwellings).

Although the Order built new defence systems in different parts of Malta, most of the inhabitants seem to have remained reluctant to occupy the island's coastal areas, except for the Grand Harbour area (Sire 1994: 75). The hierarchical organization of settlements that emerged in the previous periods persisted in later centuries. In fact, Figure 2.24 shows a similar pattern, with the addition of Valletta, Floriana (established in 1728), and the new towns around Birgu. One point to be noted here is the fact that the major rural settlements are all located inland, almost towards the centre of the island. The distance between one settlement and the next one close to it varied between 2.5 and 4.5 km.

This map also shows that the coastal areas of south-east Malta are relatively void of any human habitation, except for the tiny village of Marsaxlokk. It also indicates that from the 17th century onwards more hamlets in this area continued to be deserted or be absorbed by the major villages located inland. On a similar note one can also observe the almost complete absence of built-up settlements in the northernmost part of the island. In western Malta the main medieval settlements survived too, but a number of hamlets continued to be depopulated and eventually became deserted. Although the number of cave-dwellings also declined, the historical evidence indicates that

troglodytism still survived in a number of localities (Buhagiar 2002: 254-55). Therefore, this demonstrates a change in local land use during this period, with the settlements becoming less dispersed either because the inhabitants of the rural hamlets went to live in the established larger villages or else migrated to the Harbour towns, which both provided more employment opportunities. This transmigration of natives to the maritime towns or to the larger villages led to the desertion of a number of hamlets, and presumably also affected the amount of land that was cultivated locally; while certain rural areas were no longer cultivated (for example, in northwestern Malta), others became more extensively cultivated (for example, western and central Malta).

Another development in settlement evolution occurred in Gozo. When enemy attacks had ceased and the islands became a safe place, the Order encouraged many low class families to occupy Gozo and establish their settlements there. As a result, this period is characterized by the rise and development of various rural settlements, many of which eventually became parishes, for example Xewkija and Qala. Comparable to the Maltese village, these settlements also had a main church in their centre. The sumptuous parish churches that were built in some of the main villages of this island during this period, which emulated those of the urban centres, show a similar trend towards a better standard of living among the rural community as occurred in Malta.

The settlement pattern that emerges during this period demonstrates the gradual urbanization of the Grand Harbour area, which led to the rise and development of new towns. The new settlements were all characterized by a gridiron street plan, in contrast to the labyrinthine and irregular street plan of the traditional rural village (Jäger 2004: 4-7). Outside the Harbour area, several hamlets disappeared, while others developed into proto-urban settlements and became parishes, the economy of which depended on their agricultural products and on the various artisanal products they produced. Rural communities preferred inland settlements even though several new defensive systems along the coast were developed. There was also a major settlement evolution in Gozo with the rise and development of several villages in various parts of the island.

2.4 The Colonial Period

This period constitutes the last phase of colonization before Malta's political independence in 1964. After two years of French occupation the islands became a British possession and remained so for 164 years. The Colonial period had a tremendous effect on Maltese society. Whereas in the previous period the Maltese islands were drawn closer to the European domain of influence, now the country became an integral part of the British Empire, the direct or indirect influence of which spread from the American continent to Asia, Africa and Australia. Although at first many Maltese found it difficult to integrate into the new English culture and accept a different lifestyle, especially those who still favoured the Italian language and culture which had been dominant in the previous periods (sections 2.2.2 and 2.3.2 above), eventually the British experience became entrenched into the local culture, elements of which still persist to the present day (Frendo 1988).

2.4.1 Political development

The primary objective of the British Empire was to develop the Maltese islands as a military base. In fact, whilst during the first fifty years of occupation the British limited themselves to restoring the existing defensive walls and adapting them to their exigencies, the second half of the 19th century saw the development of new coastal and inland defensive systems, at a time when Britain's dominant position in the Mediterranean was threatened by the emergence of a powerful Italian navy (De Lucca 1988: 314-16; Williams 1988: 37).

Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 the Maltese islands became a crucial link in the chain of bases the British possessed to ensure their naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, their influence in the Middle East, and all their lines of communication to India (Howe 1988: 350).

A defensive wall crossing the Great Fault from Binġemma to Madliena (known as the Victoria Lines) separated the northern part of Malta, which was the least inhabited, from the rest of the island. Along this wall were built three fortifications (Fort Binġemma, Fort Mosta and Fort Madliena) and other minor systems. The British built this 12 km wall because they feared that an enemy landing in the undefended north of Malta could establish an artillery line which could cause major damage on the harbour installations, which were so vital for the maintenance of the British fleet, their source of power in the Mediterranean.

In the Grand Harbour Fort Rinella was specifically developed to house an Armstrong 100-ton cannon and protect better the Grand Harbour from any potential enemy (Figure 2.25). Other defence systems and watchtowers were added to the existing structures in the first half of the 20th century. During this period the Maltese islands had a direct or indirect involvement in various military campaigns, particularly in the Second World War (Cassar 1988: 212; Clare 1988: 152; Williams 1988: 38-39; Blouet 1993: 197-209).

The islands were administered by a Governor appointed by the Crown on recommendation of the British prime minister. Later British legislation permitted the establishment of an elected council of government to assist the Governor in the daily administration of the colony (Frendo 1988: 194).

The council of government was responsible for the local finances and could legislate on practically all matters concerning internal affairs; the Crown had the right to intervene in exceptional circumstances (Blouet 1993: 157-58). The next most senior member of the Colonial administration was the Chief Secretary, while the most senior person in legal matters was the Crown's Advocate. The most senior member of the judiciary was the Chief Justice. Other top officials included the ports superintendent, the hospitals inspector, the auditor general, the chief of police, the head of public works and the collector of government revenues. Beneath these a group of senior civil servants, generally either British or anglophile Maltese, were responsible for the management of the various government departments.

Many of the buildings previously occupied by the Knights were converted into government departments, while the Grand Master's palace in the centre of Valletta

became the Governor's palace, which remained the centre of local politics until recent times. Reforms were carried out in the legal sector, while measures were taken to make English as the new language of administration (Blouet 1993: 146).

The Colonial government sought to maintain good relations with the Maltese, particularly with the Church, which often looked at British reforms with a suspicious eye, fearing that the inhabitants, especially the illiterate, would be influenced by teachings or literature that went against its official policies and doctrine (Bezzina 1988: 51-56). In fact, the Colonial government hardly ever intervened in Church matters, not even in the choice of new bishops. It was during this period that the diocese of Malta was separated from the See of Palermo (in 1831), while Gozo became an autonomous diocese about thirty years later.

The establishment of a council of government elected by the people was the first step forward in Maltese politics towards more democratic governance at a national level. The first general elections were held in 1849, with the following ones taking place every three to five years (Schiavone 1987). However, until the early decades of the 20th century interest by the common people in local politics seems to have been minimal. For example, the Colonial government's attempt in the late 19th century to establish a number of district committees for better representation at a local level did not succeed. In the general elections of 1900, from a total of about 10,000 eligible voters less than half exercised this right (Schiavone 1987: 13).

It appears that during this period the common people were more interested in having a stable employment to earn their daily living than in local politics. Certain councils of government consisted of two groups of representatives: the general elected members who represented the people of each electoral district, and the special elected members who represented special groups, for example the nobility and the business community.

The islands experienced further evolution in politicization between 1880 and 1921, when the so-called Language Question, whether Malta's official language had to be English or Italian, sparked off a long and heated political debate between the Anglophiles (mainly the industrial and commercial entrepreneurs) and those who were in favour of Italian (mainly the Church, the nobility, lawyers and notaries). This particular situation, coupled with the general discontent with Imperial politics among the upper classes of Maltese society, led to the birth of two main political parties which still characterize local politics today (Blouet 1993: 182-84; Cassar 2001: 270). In 1921 Malta was granted its first self-government constitution and the general elections held in the same year were contested for the first time by four political parties. Those elections were also characterized by a high turnout of voters (Schiavone 1987: 183-84). For the first time in local politics, Malta also had its own prime minister. This constitution gave legislative and administrative powers to a bicameral system of government: the Legislative Assembly (or the lower House of Parliament) and the Senate. However, from 1945 onwards Malta kept a unicameral system of representation to the present day (Koster 1988: 87).

Further political development was registered in 1947 with the introduction of universal suffrage, which allowed all women the right to vote. However, self-

government constitutions were revoked or suspended whenever this was considered in the best interest of the British realm.

During this period Valletta remained Malta's capital city, while the main town of Gozo was Rabat, which in the late 19th century was renamed Victoria in honour of the British monarch's golden jubilee.

2.4.2 The social organization, class structure and the quality of life

The Colonial period had an indelible effect on Maltese society. If the previous period brought the islands closer to Europe, particularly Italy and France, this phase put them on the map of the British Empire, bringing them closer to a different culture and lifestyle. The Colonial government's emphasis to make English Malta's official language led to the emergence of three different social groups:

a) the pro-Italian group: those who remained under the influence of Italian culture, language and lifestyle, particularly the clergy, legal practitioners, part of the local nobility and certain politicians;
b) the Anglophiles: those who were influenced by British culture and English lifestyle, mainly the business community, various academics, schoolmasters, members of the nobility, politicians, and whoever was employed with the civil service, the military or the Royal Navy;
c) The passive and the active supporters of the Maltese language: the passive group was represented by those who had no formal education such as the peasantry and the poor, while the active group included those Maltese intellectuals who promoted their native culture.

Despite the opposition from certain factions of the local society to the introduction of the English language, this soon became the country's official means of communication and, with the development of the local education system from the late 19th century onwards, it also became the main language of instruction. In 1934 Italian was replaced by the Maltese language, which together with English became the country's two official languages. This paved the way for these two languages to be taught in all public schools, with Italian being gradually relegated to the status of a foreign language (Frendo 1988: 203). Whilst today Maltese is the country's national language, English is considered as Malta's second official language.

During this period the Maltese islands experienced a demographic increase, from about 120,000 people in the early 19th century to approximately 315,000 by the end of the period under study (Cassar 1988: 93). This means that in a period of 164 years the local population increased by about 163%.

Although the national census records show that the indigenous population continued to grow in all the towns and villages, the highest population density was registered in the Grand Harbour region. In fact, the population density of the Harbour region (the North Harbour and the South Harbour considered together) increased from 2,823 persons per km^2 in 1851 to 7,484 persons per km^2 in 1967. In all the other census regions the rise in population density increased at a more stable rate (section 4.5 below).

The economic importance of the Harbour region generated a higher population and also the development of new settlements, which reached parish status in a relatively short time. Despite the continuous rise in the islands' population, there were historical moments which caused a demographic decline, for example epidemics (the 1813 plague), mass emigration (in the late 19th and early 20th century, then again in the 1950s), and warfare (the Second World War) (Cassar 1988: 98-99).

The presence of the British military in the Grand Harbour brought a shift in employment patterns, particularly in Valletta, Birgu and Senglea. Although these harbour towns still remained important commercial centres as they were in the previous period, they now also attracted many Maltese to work in the naval dockyard or in the military (see more detailed discussion in section 2.4.3 below).

The political set-up of the Maltese islands and the development which occurred in the local political scene led to a reconfiguration of the local class structure. During this period Maltese society was divided into the following classes:

a) **the upper class**, which included both British and Maltese, comprised:
   i. the government and politicans: the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor and the members of the council of government. Eventually this came to include all the politicians who formed part of different parties. Except for the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor and other Crown representatives who were directly appointed by the British government, the politicians were elected by the people during general elections. Those elected in government were vested with legislative and administrative powers for their term of office. Those who were not elected were members of the Opposition. The two main political parties that emerged during the 19th century, the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party, are still the major political rivals today. The government was the country's wealthiest landowner (possessing about 32% of the total land) (Bugeja 2003: 36), because all the former property of the Order, including land, houses and palaces now became public property. The civil courts were presided by the Chief Justice and all the members of the judiciary were State appointed;
   ii. the Church: this was the second highest institution in the country. It fell under the authority of the bishop. He was represented by the parish priests in the various towns and villages. In the first half of the 19th century Malta became a separate diocese from Palermo and was elevated to the status of archdiocese in 1944. Gozo became a separate diocese in 1864 and had its own bishop. The local Church was another major landowner, with many of its estates having been acquired by the faithful in the form of benefices and private foundations. It possessed about 18% of the total land (Bugeja 2003: 36-39). The Church in Malta also included the diocesan clergy and numerous convents spread in various parts of the islands. Various councils of government included a member of the clergy to represent the local Church;

iii. the nobility: during the Colonial period this class no longer enjoyed any *de jure* political power, but remained influential in various aspects of Maltese society. Apart from the fact that some nobles were prominent politicians, others excelled in the business sector. Possessing several land estates in Malta and Gozo (about 10% of the total land), the nobility also employed many landless peasants and farm labourers as tenant farmers or herdsmen (Bugeja 2003: 37). For some time this group was regularly represented in various councils of government;

b) **the middle class**, which during this period became increasingly intensive, comprised:
   i. the professional group: this consisted of lawyers, notaries, doctors, dentists, architects, civil engineers and pharmacists;
   ii. civil servants: this included all those who worked in the Malta civil service and government departments, mainly clerks, accountants, book-keepers, teachers, school inspectors, among others. These had a sufficient basic level of education in English and Mathematics;
   iii. the commercial group: this included major entrepreneurs, bankers, money lenders, merchants and entrepreneurial landowners. In 1848 the top businessmen allied their forces and established the Chamber of Commerce, a voluntary organization intended to safeguard their commercial interests and to boost their trading relations with the outside world. The Chamber had its representatives in several councils of government. Lower down in this group were numerous small and medium-sized retailers and manufacturers as well as shop and tavern owners. There were also numerous artisans, many of whom were established in the maritime towns, with others working in the villages;
   iv. the naval and military: this group included all those who were employed with the British army and navy, for example sailors, petty officers, cooks, soldiers, sergeants, bombardiers and skilled craftsmen (the middle class owned about 22% of the total land in Malta and Gozo) (Bugeja 2003: 38), and

c) **the lower class**: this included, among others, small peasant landowners (these owned about 18% of the total land in Malta and Gozo), landless peasants, fishermen, labourers and servants (Bugeja 2003: 38-39). A number of rural labourers earned their daily living by working on the farm estates, while many others worked in the maritime urban centres as stevedores, storekeepers, dock workers, cargo handlers, servants and street hawkers. Slavery was abolished in 1833 from the British Empire, and therefore slaves no longer formed part of this class (Fay 1941: 83-84).

The class structure that developed during this period permitted more social mobility from one class to the other. Census records show that between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century the lower class declined from approximately 45% in 1861 to 16% of the total population in 1967, which reflects an improved standard of living. This period of about one hundred years also experienced a rise in the local middle class,

from about 38% in the mid-19th century to approximately 63% of the total population in 1967. During the same period, the upper class fluctuated between 17 and 14% of the total population. The two main reasons for this class reconfiguration are that education became compulsory and more government schools were opened to provide free education.

Despite the social background, those who acquired a certain level of education or pursued further studies at the university had more employment opportunities, and therefore of moving to a higher social class. During this period, politics and government were no longer in the hands of an oligarchy. A move towards more democratization of governance and the introduction of general elections implied that even persons hailing from the middle or lower classes of society could theoretically aspire to become politicians or members of government. Through time certain classes, for example the nobility, no longer enjoyed the privilege to be *de jure* represented in the council of government. Moreover, the Church continued to distance itself from local politics, thus developing a clear separation between State and Church.

The historical events that unfolded during the Colonial period, particularly after the Second World War, made social mobility more possible and narrowed down the gap between the classes. For example, after 1947, when education became compulsory for all children up to fourteen years of age, the lowest class continued to shrink since many more people were ending up with at least a basic level of education, and therefore with more possibilities of finding a job with a decent salary. Those who aspired to join the civil service continued with their secondary level of education, while others went on to university to become lawyers, doctors or architects, amongst other professions.

According to census records, between the early 20th century and the post-war years the rate of illiteracy in the Maltese islands declined from about 73% (in 1901) to approximately 4% of the total population (in 1956), which shows that education no longer remained a privilege for the few. This scenario brought a better standard of living and an improved quality of life, even among the lower classes of society (Cassar 1988: 118-20).

The Maltese family, largely of a nuclear structure, also experienced important phases of development. Among the elite and the upper middle class this came under Victorian influence, which emphasized a clear separation between gender roles. While the husband was considered as the breadwinner and was expected to earn a living outside the house, the wife's place was at home. Within the upper echelons of Maltese society it was improper for a married woman to work outside the house, when she had her children to take care of.

The Victorian era also brought with it a division between parents and children. For example, children were not expected to eat with their parents, but with the nursemaid. The mother's role was to give her children basic life skills and instruction, while it was the father's role to discipline them. According to this way of thinking, a man's role was usually associated with reason and the public sphere of life, while a woman's role was more domestically oriented. The Victorian family was, therefore, considered as a centre of stability, which provided retreat from stress and turmoil of the busy life outside

(Valentino 2006: 52). This new lifestyle influenced the way the internal spaces of a house were organized (section 3.6 below).

With the lower class life was different. Poor wives or widows had to find work outside the house to earn a living, support their family and pay the house rent (Clare 1988: 128). According to census records, in the 19th century many rural women worked as spinners and weavers; in 1861 from a total of about 9,000 workers listed as spinners and weavers, 96% were women (Cassar 1988: 97). Instead of sending them to school, poor parents often encouraged their children to find work to earn some extra money (Vassallo 2007: 183-200). Moreover, these families usually lived in small dwellings in which individual privacy and separation between parents and children were simply nonexistent.

After the Second World War the separation between villagers and urban dwellers became even narrower, when more demographic mobility from the villages to the towns, and later on the other way round, brought a blend of cultures. This mixture of cultures, together with the progress in the field of communication and education, gradually led to the adoption and development of new lifestyle and leisure patterns, especially among the younger generation. Better working conditions for both men and women, and more emphasis on gender equality, led many families to seek more spacious dwellings and to equip them with at least the most basic furniture, amenities and services.

As happened in South Italian cities between the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century (Sabelberg 1986: 62; Bintliff 2014a: 216), the centre of Valletta no longer remained an exclusive elite area. During this period there was a tendency among several well-off families to leave their townhouses to settle elsewhere outside the city, generally in quieter areas, therefore a number of unoccupied townhouses ended up being gradually inhabited by lower class families. In several cases, these townhouses were partitioned to accommodate more than one family.

Besides the house type and size, the level of education and social status, other indicators of the quality of life include a person's diet and lifestyle. For example, while the poor could afford a simple diet, which consisted mainly of bread, macaroni and vegetables, the well-to-do generally consumed a wider variety of products, including meat and good quality wine (Davy 1842: 417; Ballou 1893: 70-71). A good diet was crucial to keep a healthy lifestyle. In fact, the national census records for the late 19th and early 20th century demonstrate that infant mortality was more common among the poor because of malnutrition and a higher probability of contagious diseases (Cassar 1988: 103-105).

Diseases in substandard housing, for example in the Manderaggio area, spread like wildfire not only because dwellings were small and poorly ventilated and the residents lived in overcrowded conditions, but also because these often lacked a proper sewage system and a drinking water supply. It is estimated that in the mid-19th century the number of residents living in the Manderaggio area was of approximately 3,000 people (or about 12.5% of the total Valletta population). This declined during the first half of the 20th century, during which the number of Manderaggio residents varied between 1,000 and 1,200 persons (or about 5% of the total Valletta residents) (Cassar 1988: 103-

104; Vassallo 2007: 156-60). These figures indicate the government's attempt to reduce substandard housing and possibly also the aspiration of several lower class families for improved housing conditions and a better quality of life (section 7.5 below).

The post-war social and demographic changes made British-style food more popular among the local community (Cassar 1988: 102). A better diet, improved housing conditions, access to free public healthcare and education as well as more awareness of personal hygiene were all important ingredients which in the post-war period brought a better standard of living and a longer life expectancy.

A comfortable lifestyle also meant that in the house all manual work was carried out by paid servants, for example cooking, cleaning or laundering (Shepherd 1926). In this way, the lady of the house would focus her attention on household management and child upbringing. Working class families could not afford to employ house servants, therefore all manual work had to be carried out by the members of the same family, particularly by the wife.

The well-to-do usually enjoyed part of their leisure by entertaining their guests (relatives or friends) during family parties or dinners. Others could afford to go for a holiday abroad or to have a second residence, situated in a rural area or by the seaside, in which the family could enjoy their time together away from the busy town life. Working class families enjoyed their leisure time in a different way. For example, during summer the members of the family usually assembled on the house's roof to enjoy the evening fresh breeze and socialize (Angas 1842: 16). It was also customary for many working class families, especially in summer, to spend their evenings together in the village streets in front of their own house to socialize and pray together.

House furniture, furnishings and items also reflected the family's quality of life. A house that contained several furniture items and furnishings was generally associated with high social status. Elite dwellings were usually characterized by several elegant furniture sets and by fine quality tableware and house furnishings.

Lower class houses usually contained a few pieces of locally made, inferior quality furniture, which served the family's basic needs. However, the post-war economic development and social change permitted more families to live in decent houses which were also properly furnished (section 8.2 below).

The dress code distinguished the elite from the rest of the people. The artistic evidence shows that the well-off were influenced by English and Italian fashion designs, but lower class persons were clearly identified by their typical simple garments (Cassar 1988: 104). It was still common to see peasants walking barefoot in the villages and towns. Until the Second World War the ethnic *għonnella* was still commonly used by lower class women, but not among the elite. This situation changed in the post-war period when the villagers, particularly the young, became more influenced by the town culture and urban lifestyle.

Although 1964 marked the end of a colonial era and the beginning of Malta's statehood, the influence of British culture is still evident in many aspects of local contemporary society, for example in the language and lifestyle. However, the development of a new State was not an easy task for post-Independence governments, because Malta was no longer a military base, and with its limited natural resources new

economic models had to be identified to generate wealth and employment. Given the island's geographical position and particular climate, tourism was considered as an alternative to boost the country's economy.

More emphasis was also laid on the manufacturing industry. Foreign private investment and the development of a capitalist economy were both considered as crucial for a country like Malta. This led to the development of new industrial estates or areas in various parts of the country. It was evident that, in the absence of natural resources, the most important resource for Malta's economy was human capital. With Malta's political independence, most of the estates that formerly pertained to the Colonial government became the property of the new Maltese State.

The remaining property occupied by the British military was transferred to the Maltese government in 1979, when British military presence came to an end. Through the 1992 agreement between the Holy See and the Government of Malta it was agreed that the Church in Malta had to transfer most of its estates to the Government, in return of which the latter was bound to financially support all Church schools in Malta and Gozo, for example to pay the teachers' salaries. This agreement made the Government of Malta the country's major landowner, today occupying about 55% of all the total land. The remaining 45% of the total land in Malta and Gozo is the property of private landowners (Scicluna 2013: 20).

2.4.3 The economy

British colonialism brought with it a variety of employment opportunities, particularly in the civil service and the military, which turned these islands into a fortress economy (Busuttil 1988: 158). The nineteenth-century naval dockyard employed many Maltese and continued to do so until the second half of the 20th century (Clare 1988: 144, 149). Statistical records show that between the late 19th century and the mid-20th century the number of dockyard employees increased from 3,000 to 12,000, respectively (Cassar 1988: 96). The Malta dockyard provided both shipbuilding and ship repairing services.

The building of new fortifications and the development of new or the extension of existing settlements on the two islands generated employment in the quarry and building industry. The construction of new roads or the extension of existing ones was also another source of employment for many Maltese.

The improvement of the local road network and the introduction of new means of transport (the omnibus, the train, the tram and eventually buses and private cars) signified that it was possible to travel from one part of the island to another in a shorter period of time than ever before. Organized sea transport was important to cross from one part of the Grand Harbour to the other and to cross between Malta and Gozo (Cassar 1988: 112-16).

In the rural areas agriculture was an important means of living for many peasant families. However cotton cultivation, which was so significant in the previous period, now declined due to the availability of cheaper cotton fabrics from other parts of the British Empire (Blouet 1993: 147; Vassallo 2007: 164-70). Potato cultivation was introduced into the islands in 1803, but this had to take approximately a century to become a major cash crop. Another important crop intended for local consumption was

wheat, while animal husbandry was spread in various parts of the islands (Bugeja 2003: 70-72, 75-79).

The decline in the local cotton industry compelled farm labourers to seek alternative employment in the urban areas, particularly the Grand Harbour district which offered a variety of employment opportunities, for example wharf activities, in the dockyard or in the military (Cassar 1988: 95; Vassallo 2001: 21). Others, especially women, found employment as domestic staff with families of British officers and servicemen who were stationed in Malta. There was an attempt to establish a large-scale silk industry in Malta, but this declined shortly after its inception and by the late thirties of the 19th century this industry died out completely (Clare 1988: 143).

Trade and commerce were of particular importance for the local economy. Amongst the locally manufactured exportable products there were cotton goods, leather, soap, macaroni and salt, while imports included silk, hemp, flax, coffee, cocoa, tobacco leaf, wool and wax, some of which were re-exported to other markets (Clare 1988: 144).

In Valletta and the Three Cities there was a large community of local and foreign businessmen and shop owners who sold or negotiated a wide variety of products (Vassallo 2001: 24-25). Shops, artisan workshops and taverns were widespread in most of the localities around Malta and Gozo, and in every village there were shops that sold or provided basic products like the baker, the meat seller and later on, from the early 20th century onwards, a grocery too. In the village it was also common to find some artisans, for example a carpenter, a blacksmith, a shoemaker or a tinsmith. Coastal settlements, like Marsaxlokk in the south of the island, St. Paul's Bay in north Malta and Mġarr, Gozo, became important fishing centres.

The late 19th century was however characterized by a general economic decline. Grain trade and bunkering activities both experienced economic difficulties, as a result of which the Maltese islands did not remain an important and competitive trading port in the Mediterranean despite their strategic position (Vassallo 2001: 21-22). The 1887 cholera outbreak was another factor in this economic decline, since it temporarily disrupted most trading activities (Clare 1988: 151). All this generated more poverty and unemployment and, comparable to what occurred in other Mediterranean countries, for example Greece and Italy, many lower class families had to seek alternative employment opportunities abroad, for example in North Africa, Egypt or Gibraltar (Fairchild 1911; Rosoli 1978). In the early 20th century, other communities of Maltese emigrated to Australia, USA, Canada, Britain and other English-speaking countries (Jones 1973: 106; Cassar 1988: 98-99). The last wave of mass emigration occurred during the late fifties of the last century, as a result of the rundown of the British forces which caused massive unemployment (King 1979: 246).

After political independence and with the rundown of the British military forces the Maltese islands could no longer depend on a fortress economy. The three development plans that the government approved between 1959 and 1980 were specifically aimed to generate more employment and economic diversification, based primarily on tourism and the manufacturing industry (Bowen Jones *et al.* 1962). This led to the building of many hotels and various industrial estates in different parts of the

country. According to national census records, by 1970 there were about 14,600 people working in the local tourism industry (about 16% of all gainfully occupied in the Maltese islands) and approximately 26,000 people who were employed in the manufacturing industry (about 28% of all gainfully occupied in the Maltese islands).

In more recent years, from the late 20th century onwards, the country's economic growth was marked by an expansion in the service sector, with particular emphasis on banking, financial services and information technology. In fact, according to recent official statistics, the service industry contributes to about 81% of Malta's gross domestic product (GDP), while industry contributes to 17% and agriculture to only 2% of the country's GDP.

2.4.4 The settlements

The Colonial period had a significant impact on local settlement. The following analysis is concerned with the main settlement trends that characterized this period, at a time when the Maltese islands became a strategic military and naval base and the country's wealth largely depended on its fortress economy. This period saw the expansion of already existing settlements and also the establishment of new urban and rural ones in different parts of the islands. The main reasons for this settlement evolution are:

a) a general demographic rise in the Maltese islands;
b) the building of new fortifications and military quarters in addition to the already existing defensive systems;
c) the economic activity of the Grand Harbour area;
d) land reclamation incentives for agricultural purposes;
e) an improved road network.

This period of settlement growth coincides with the implementation of Ordinance II of 1880 (known better as the Building Regulations), the objective of which was to improve and regulate housing conditions in the country (Pinfold 1894). These introduced for the first time the concept of minimum street width and maximum building height linked to the street width. In the new settlements or residential areas that began to develop during this period, streets started to be laid down at least three times as wide as they had been before (Tonna 1985: 40, 55-56). This nineteenth-century legislation also encouraged the end of central courtyard houses in favour of extroverted terrace houses with frontages limited to 2-3 canes' width (approximately 4 - 6.5 m) that were built to serve the increasing population in the urban and suburban areas. Thus, this new form of housing with repetitive wall construction and a balcony (locally known as *gallarija*) on the outside became characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century settlement development (Tonna 1985: 60).

Figure 2.26 shows the distribution of built-up settlements in the early 20th century, approximately a century following Malta's British occupation. The main settlements of northern Malta were the already established Naxxar and Mosta (Figure 2.27). However, incentives of land reclamation for agricultural purposes led to the re-emergence of Mellieħa, an area with a parish status since the 14th century, but which had

subsequently been abandoned (Bugeja 2003: 48-49; Vella 2010: 241-42). In the 19th century Mellieħa continued to expand and was declared a parish again in 1844. A new maritime village, St. Paul's Bay, developed in one of the harbour areas of this district. Some hamlets survived, given their proximity to agriculturally fertile lands. Another village which flourished during this period was Mġarr. Similar to Mellieħa, Mġarr has a gridiron street layout and, unlike the older villages, its parish church is not located in the centre. The part of Mosta that developed during this period close to the old village core was also characterized by a rectilinear street plan (Figures 2.28 and 2.29). Settlement development in this region, particularly its northernmost part, suggests that this had by now become a safe place for habitation (Blouet 1978: 368).

The main settlements of western Malta were Rabat, Żebbuġ and Siġġiewi, which remained largely rural (Figure 2.30). This region was also characterized by the presence of some hamlets which were inhabited by different farming communities, for example Mtaħleb and Is-Santi. Towards the eastern part of this district the three nearby settlements of Attard, Lija and Balzan continued to prosper (Frendo 1997; Dimech 2004; Azzopardi 2006).

The major development that took place in terms of settlement evolution was in the Harbour district (Figure 2.31). While the existing settlements continued to prosper in terms of population size, several new ones were established too. In the area surrounding Marsamxett Harbour four new settlements were established, including Sliema, which developed during the second half of the 19th century and reached parish status in 1878. Sliema was originally a popular summer resort for the wealthier residents of Valletta and British military officers, but later became permanently inhabited (Cassar 1997: 142). For many years, its 3 km sea promenade was characterized by a series of Victorian style villas and townhouses which were demolished in the second half of the 20th century because of modern urban development. Marsa and Ħamrun, located towards the south of Valletta and Floriana, grew into larger towns to respond to the increasing number of working class families (Tonna 1985: 38; Blouet 1993: 172).

On the outskirts of the Three Cities a new settlement, Kalkara, developed on the north-eastern part of the Grand Harbour. The settlements of this region were the ones that grew rapidly in terms of population size, so much that some of them were, during the 20th century, divided into more than one parish. Paola, Żabbar and Tarxien also continued to prosper, with the former being elevated to parish status in the early 20th century.

The settlements of south-eastern Malta, except for Żejtun, were relatively smaller than those of the other districts (Figure 2.32). Three other villages, Marsaxlokk, Birżebbuġa and Marsascala, developed in two harbour areas (Abela 1999; Grech 1997; Attard 2004). South-eastern Malta remained an area generally characterized by a low population density (Callus 1998; Bonello 2007).

Concerning Gozo, the settlement pattern remained similar to the one that prevailed in the late 18th century. However, one can note the emergence of some coastal settlements in different parts of the island. The small settlement on Comino, which

existed already in the previous period, survived but was eventually abandoned almost completely in the second half of the 20th century (Figure 2.33).

The Second World War caused the loss of many lives as well as damage to several towns and villages, particularly in the Grand Harbour area. Post-war governments sought to mitigate the problem of homeless families by embarking on various projects to reconstruct existing residential areas. New houses and apartments were built to accommodate more families (Tonna 1985: 70-71).

Despite the emigration of many families to other continents in the early fifties of the last century, the housing shortage that continued to characterize these islands and the discouraging 1947 Rent Law led to the development of the earliest housing estate, run by the Church, located in the outskirts of Ħamrun. Additionally, to accommodate more families and eliminate substandard housing, the government invested part of its annual budget in the development of new housing estates and residential areas in different localities.

Until the acquisition of political independence in 1964 the local settlements that had developed during the 19th century continued to grow, some at a faster rate than others. In particular, the Harbour district continued to register a higher population density compared to all the other regions.

A major development in settlement evolution, however, occurred with the islands' industrialization process, which commenced soon after the country's independence with the development of the first industrial areas. Those of Marsa and San Ġwann were among the earliest to be developed. These industrial zones encouraged the development of new settlements or new residential areas in the outskirts of existing settlements. With the expansion of the tourism industry certain coastal settlements, for instance St. Paul's Bay and St. Julian's, were developed into tourist centres.

The building boom which occurred between the late fifties and the sixties was intended to meet the country's new economic needs and to accommodate more people in decent dwellings. However, this had an important impact on the traditional Maltese villages, because their annular green areas by which they were characterized for many centuries, were now jeopardized in the name of progress. At this time Malta lacked proper town planning legislation, and the absence of experienced town planners led speculators to abusively build houses that were not always covered by a building permit (Tonna 1985: 82).

Another characteristic that also influenced settlement evolution from the second half of the 20th century onwards was the improvement in the local road network (Cassar 1988: 113-16). However, the widening of roads in several village centres led to the partial elimination of the original layout of the Maltese village. New arterial and peripheral roads were developed in different parts of Malta to facilitate communication from one part of the island to another and serve as a boundary line prohibiting further extension of settlements. Contrary to what they were originally intended, these roads encouraged further urban sprawl and several neighbouring settlements ended up merging into each other. Settlements like Mosta, Għargħur and Naxxar; Birkirkara, St. Venera and Ħamrun, as well as Lija, Balzan and Attard lost their annulus of green area and became like one extensive settlement (Buttigieg 1990). The northern littoral of

Malta, from St. Julian's on the Marsamxett side to Kalkara on the Grand Harbour side, became almost a single strip of urban development (Figure 2.34).

This development led to a demographic shift from one part of the island to another. Better public transport and ownership of private cars made it easier for many families to live outside the densely populated towns (Bonnici and Cassar 1987; Cassar 1988: 113-16). The well-off families built their houses in new and quiet residential areas, characterized by villas, bungalows and detached houses. Rural settlements and their outskirts became an attraction for families that previously lived in the urban areas. This period also witnessed the earliest restoration projects of farmhouses and houses of character, which were generally occupied by retired English people as a result of Malta's particular climate, tax concessions and property investment opportunities.

Figure 2.35 shows the distribution of local settlements towards the end of the 20th century. Although the Harbour district remains distinctly the most inhabited area of the Maltese islands, urban development also took place in other areas. Comparatively, northern, western and south-eastern Malta remained less densely occupied.

Urban development in Gozo also led to a conurbation process towards the centre of the island, with the immediate villages around Victoria now forming almost one extensive settlement (Figure 2.36). Compared to other areas of the same island, the west and north-west remained less densely inhabited.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the political, economic and social set-up as well as the settlement evolution of the Maltese islands between the Medieval period and the second half of the 20th century, encompassing more than a millennium. It also explored various issues concerning class structure, the quality of life, and Malta's relationships with the outside world.

In the political field, the country experienced three major systems of administration. From a municipal type of government that characterized most of the Middle Ages, the Knights' period saw the development of a more centralized, oligarchic system where all political, administrative and economic decisions were taken by the Order of St. John. In the Colonial period there was a shift towards more democratization of governance, because for the first time in history, the Maltese were granted the right to elect their own representatives at a national level. Through this whole period the Church exerted a high degree of influence on its believers, although a process of secularization from the second half of the 20th century onwards meant that this organization became socially less popular. This chapter also demonstrated that from a politically powerful medieval social group, the nobility became less influential in political matters during the Knights' period, and by the 20th century a person's noble background no longer remained a *de jure* privilege to serve on government.

Malta's economic system developed from one that was largely introverted and agriculturally oriented to an extrovert economy based on entrepot trade, and from one that promoted subsistence farming to a proto-industrial economy which emphasized the

cultivation and trading of cash crops, particularly cotton. In the Knights' period trading contacts with the outside world increased and the Grand Harbour became a thriving place of commercial activity and employment opportunities. In the Colonial period the country was dominated by a fortress economy, given its particular strategic position in the Mediterranean. This type of economy led to a decline in agriculture and to an increase in skilled labour, particularly in the military service. However, with the rundown of the British forces before political independence, Malta had to shift its economy to one that was mainly based on manufacture, tourism and the service industry. Although the manufacturing industry and tourism remained important contributors to the country's gross domestic product, from the late 20th century onwards the local economy shifted more towards the service sector, with particular emphasis on banking, financial services and information technology.

Concerning class structure, this chapter revealed that during the Medieval period class was highly segmented and rigid, in which a person's place in society was fixed from the cradle to the grave. Nevertheless, the economic and political changes that occurred locally between the late 13th and the 14th century brought about the defeudalization of various enfeodded lands, with the result that the lower classes acquired more access to landownership and social mobility. Although in the Medieval period many estates (about 63%) remained in the hands of the nobility and the Church, and these lands were worked by tenant farmers, landownership among the local rural community became widespread. This brought about the development of new agricultural practices, the proto-industrialization of the major villages as well as different levels of wealth among the peasants. In the Knights' period the emphasis on trade in line with government policy gave rise to a new commercial middle class which became quite prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, agriculture in this period remained an important contributor to the local economy. To stimulate the peasant economy many landowners, including the Knights and the Church, often kept ground rents at a low price. The Order made other incentives by leasing its local estates to tenant farmers at affordable rates, sometimes with the addition of a farmhouse, to encourage them to cultivate certain parts of the country whilst avoiding overpopulation in the urban settlements of the Harbour region. In the Colonial period the differences between social classes became more fluid because more access to free education, diversification of employment and a move towards a nationally elected government made social mobility even more possible. In the post-war period, particularly due to the improvement of the local road network and transport system, the gap between the classes continued to narrow and the difference between villagers and town dwellers became less evident.

Class structure is related to the quality of life, the main indicators of which are the house type, the dress code, the level of education, diet and health as well as lifestyle. This chapter has shown that during the period under study the elite and upper middle class were generally more abreast with current issues in Europe concerning fashion, house interior and lifestyle. They usually could afford to live in sumptuous dwellings with fine quality, usually imported, furniture and house items. They also normally could afford a more elaborate diet and had more access to medical services and

education. The elite enjoyed their leisure time in different ways, for example by going abroad for a holiday or by having a summer residence in the countryside or by the seaside. Lower class families generally lived in small houses, often in single or two-room dwellings, in which sanitary conditions were generally poor. Substandard housing, the lack of a proper basic education, and little awareness of personal hygiene were often the main cause of contagious diseases and epidemics. Although until the early 17th century it was not customary for houses to be embellished with many furniture items, during the Baroque these increased in the elite and upper middle class houses, through Italian and French influence, but not in those of the lower classes. This situation changed in the post-war period, when the demolition of substandard housing, more access to free education and healthcare as well as the general improvement in the standard of living led to a better quality of life. After the Second World War, internal migration and an improved road network led to a blend of cultures, bringing villagers and urban residents closer together. Moreover, this chapter has revealed that the type of house, its size and location are important indicators of quality of life and also a mirror of local class structure.

Our evidence also revealed that the emulation of urban (religious and secular) architecture in the local major villages and the economic changes that these experienced to develop into proto-urban settlements, particularly from the early modern period onwards, influenced the lifestyle of the villagers, particularly the rural elite who, because of their social and economic position, were clearly identifiable from their dress, diet, house type and house contents, and could afford to follow a lifestyle comparable to that of their urban counterparts (Ciappara 2014: 32-35).

Another important section in this chapter explored settlement evolution. From a dispersed settlement distribution in the early phase of the Medieval period, the economic and social changes that occurred from the 14th century onwards led to more nucleation of settlements, with a general tendency to occupy inland areas. By the late Medieval period a number of hamlets, including cave settlements, were deserted, while others were absorbed by the major villages. With the coming of the Knights in 1530 the Harbour area became a commercial hub, while the seat of government was transferred from Mdina to Birgu and, later on, to Valletta. The urban demographic expansion of the Knights' Period, which persisted in Colonial times, provoked the rise of new towns and villages in various parts of this region, making it the most densely populated in the Maltese islands even today. In the 19th century, government incentives and the presence of the British military encouraged settlement in those areas which had been deserted for a long time or never occupied before. This phase of settlement development was in fact characterized by the spread of new villages, including coastal ones, some of which developed into towns.

Lastly this chapter has also demonstrated that during the period under review the Maltese society underwent radical changes. From an introverted medieval society, where contacts with the outside world were limited to a minority of people, the Maltese gradually became more extroverted and exposed to contacts with the global community, particularly from 1850 onwards. It is within this broad context that Maltese houses will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.