

Filigrana



INTERVISTA MINN DANICA ABELA

INTERVISTA MA' PROF ALEX MALLETT

TUL TA' HIN: GHOXRIN MINUTA U DSATAX-IL SEKONDA

DATA TAL-INTERVISTA: 7 TA' FRAR, 2025

POST: L-ARKIVJU TAL-KATIDRAL, IMDINA



Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral
11, Ange's Palace, Villegaignon Street, Mdina, Malta
E-mail: archives@metropolitanchapter.com
Tel: [00356] 21 450 303



Today the 7th of February, I Danica Abela am with Dr Alex Mallett at the Cathedral Archives for the project Filagrana.

Danica Abela: Firstly, good morning and thank you for accepting our invite to be part of this project. For the first question, how was your upbringing and how did it influence your academic journey?

Alex Mallett: Well, my upbringing was in a family which was very interested in history and as a result of that I used to get taken around a lot of museums in England where I am from, particularly museums from the medieval period and the early modern period because my parents were quite into that kind of subject. And, that's where my interest began. As a small boy though I was quite interested in the Second World War I used to like looking at books on that and I used to like looking at the aeroplanes as small boys generally do, so that was where it all began for me and I think it never really stopped and since then, when I was at school I had a lot of teachers who were very keen on imparting that kind of knowledge of history to us, we used to be taken on school trips to some Roman sites, near where we lived, we used to be taken quite a long way in secondary school to places in Wales for example to see castles there, so I had an upbringing where history was extremely important and it was part of the whole environment in which I grew up and I enjoyed listening to the stories, I enjoyed learning about what had happened in the past, and I continued to do so, I continued to go that in school in my exam topics and then I decided to take ancient history actually at University but when I was in my second year I decided to change that to what I do now which is Medieval History, particularly Medieval History of the Middle East so that is how I got to where I got now as an Associate Professor in Medieval History.

DA: And can you tell us how your relationship with Malta started, considering that your main focus is Islamic, Oriental and Asian history?

AM: Well, the number of ways in which Malta impacted me even before I started studying history at the University. For one thing, when I was learning about world war two in my school days, one of the things that I remember most clearly learning about was the Siege of Malta and the attempts by the Germans to capture Malta and the repelling them by the Maltese and the British and that really had an impact on me and I really kind of learned about Malta through that experience. Another way in which this, which I kind-of learned about Malta that time was to, you know, going to church and hearing about St. Paul being shipwrecked on Malta, this is very, as we all know this is a very important topic right now because it is the feast of St. Paul's Shipwreck in two days' time here in Malta so that again really got Malta into my mind and the last way in which that happened was when I was



Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral
11, Ange's Palace, Villegaignon Street, Mdina, Malta
E-mail: archives@metropolitanchapter.com
Tel: [00356] 21 450 303



studying Ancient History in University, Malta was a very important place then, as has been throughout history, we learned about Malta's position and its history within the Roman Empire and its place within the kind-of Mediterranean Sea which was basically a Roman lake in the ancient world. So, from that, those periods of my life, those things that I learned a long time ago, I thought it was something I was always aware of, but it was only within the last fifteen years or so that I really started to work in Malta. As you said, my main topic of research has been Oriental history, Asian history but within that broad context what I actually study is Christian-Muslim relations, and of course within the history of Malta particularly in the period of the Knights as an extremely important aspect of the history of the Islands and that is where I sort of I came here to start Maltese history.

DA: Where or when did you hear about the Cathedral Archives and what sparked your interest in researching here?

AM: Well I heard about the archives, actually from one of my mentors, academic mentors I suppose Professor Dionysius Agius from the University of Exeter who himself is Maltese and he used to be a sort of an archives assistant here many decades ago, in the 1970s I believe and he has always maintained links with the archives ever since he left Malta and started to work in UK universities, firstly with Dun Gwann Azzopardi and more lately with Mario Gauci, the Archivist here. He first drew my attention to the archives here and was kind-of relating what was in them to me and that's really where I got started becoming interested in them. I came here once I think in 2010 it was to just have a look at the archives with him, as we were kind of preparing to put some funding applications in and there, I saw the documents here and I really was amazed by what they contain so I just started then and it never stopped.

DA: You also researched the Archives of the Inquisition of Malta. Is there a particular record from this fond still imprinted in your mind?

AM: Well, there are many records which are still imprinted in my mind, yes. Almost every time I come here there is something really really interesting that I come across, so I don't want to say this is one of the, we will talk about the book in a bit, but what I find particularly interesting is the edicts actually that are extant in these archives. Every time a new inquisitor was sent from Rome to be the inquisitor in the Island they would put forth an edict which pronounce an edict, essentially setting up the rules for what the local population was allowed to do and they would write this out and then they would hang it or nail it on the door of the Church in the various villages and the Cathedrals etc. telling the people what they cannot do what they should go to the Inquisition about and what is interesting is what kind of things people were forbidden from doing. How those kinds of



Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral
11, Ange's Palace, Villegaignon Street, Mdina, Malta
E-mail: archives@metropolitanchapter.com
Tel: [00356] 21 450 303



things change over time, demonstrate the priorities of the Inquisition, the priorities of the Church changed over times so those particular are always very interesting and it seems to see to what extent the Inquisitor actually followed up on that edict. How concerned he was with one particular subject, and maybe the fact that he might not be concerned with another subject as he says in the [edict]. So, the difference between the theory of the inquisition and the practice within the actual court itself is really interesting.

DA: You researched the relationship between magic and Malta and published articles inspired by such a topic. Were the Maltese strong believed of magic, even if the Catholic Church always had a great influence on them, and if so, how is this reflected in the records found at the Cathedral Archives?

AM: Yes, well I think that the Maltese were extremely interested in magic and clearly believed in magic as well but of course it wasn't only the Maltese who were in Malta in the period we are looking at, a lot of the people who came up before of the Inquisition were not themselves Maltese, they were just people who were living here, particularly that's the case of the Knights who came from all over Europe as well as various merchants, who may come to the Islands and of course there were slaves, Muslims and Jewish people as well. And it seems like everyone at the Mediterranean basin at the time was interested in magic and trying to use magic in order to get what they want. Now over time, there seems to be two main aspects of what we would call magic in English, there was the term natural philosophy on one hand and on the other hand there is sorcery. And natural philosophy is more of the way in which certain elements or certain objects has natural properties that can be used to make or affect a change or to come or to have an effect on the world around them. And that is something which was very well known, and which the Church was not too concerned about because it wasn't necessary against Christian dogma that would happen. In fact, there is an idea that actually God put these elements within the earth and therefore he wanted or at least allowing people to use them. So that kind of thing was generally seen as being ok. And the other aspect of magic was sorcery, and that was in essence summoning up demons and trying to get them to do your bidding for you. And that of course is consulting the devil essentially or the devil's followers so of course the Church was very strongly against such activity. Within the court cases themselves we see both those kinds of magic and you see it in being done or performed on behalf of all kinds of people. You see the Knights, you see people who are churchmen, and you see the ordinary people as well, cobblers, tailors, things like that all trying to use magic to get what they want. What was particularly interesting is the kind of things that they want magic for. The elites of the society, the knights for examples seem to be obsessed of magic to gain money, to gain women and for helping them in their fighting, for obvious



Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral
11, Ange's Palace, Villegaignon Street, Mdina, Malta
E-mail: archives@metropolitanchapter.com
Tel: [00356] 21 450 303



reasons in all three cases. The lower are more concerned with magic for healing and for love magic as well they are the two things that seemed to be concerned about and that of course tells us a lot about the society of the time and what people were particularly concerned about.

DA: We recently interviewed Professor Catherine Rider who collaborated with you in various research projects. How did the book *Magic in Malta*, the one behind you, that focuses on the Inquistorial trial of Sellen Bin al-Sheikh Mansour came about?

AM: Well, the actual document that form the basis of this book was found by Professor Agius when he was working in these archives in the 1970s and he put it aside in his mind at some point to come back to it later and around 2010 he had time to actually do that. And together we put that application and money and we were fortunate enough to get funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council to do it. The reason why he found this particular trial interesting is that it actually contains a grimoire, which is a treatise on how to do magic. It tells people how to do geomancy which is using numbers to be able to predict the future and this is something that we see very very rarely actually in these kinds of documents. There is all kinds of mention within trials of books, and documents which contain things related to magic but of course they were forbidden by the inquisition and therefore, most times when they were handed over they were burned. So actually, we don't a lot of these left. This is one of the few examples that we have all the magic treatise which still exists and that we can still look at. The file itself though is much wider, is quite a long trial document and they brings people from all over Malta and Maltese society, all over Europe and Africa actually and it speaks not just to the topic of magic but to a whole range of historical circumstances, it speaks about Christian-Muslim relations because Sellem himself was a Muslim slave living on the island, it talks to slavery, because Sellem himself was a slave, it talks about inquisitorial process how a Muslim in particular is tried and does that differs significantly from the local Christian were tried, so it brings out these different strands of Maltese history and indeed wider Mediterranean history together in one place. So, it is an extremely important document; we got a lot of evidence and result out.

DA: Do you know of a record that still needs to be studied, and you are eager to consult it?

AM: There are so many documents in here that I could say that this is the case for both of those questions, so I don't want to say any particular document that I particularly want to study they are many of those. But there are, the interest of these archive is the fact that actually each documents speaks to a particular aspect of society at the time, they are all



Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral
11, Ange's Palace, Villegaignon Street, Mdina, Malta
E-mail: archives@metropolitanchapter.com
Tel: [00356] 21 450 303



about the different accusations, and different aspects of society. So we see for example documents on magic, as we've already seen, we see documents in which someone is accused for blasphemy for example, there are documents that deal with Islam or Protestant beliefs for example, so there are many different documents that actually could be used. I think what is more important for the archives is to bring all these documents together and then see exactly to comparison of them how Maltese society was at the time in all aspects of Maltese society.

DA: And do you have any advice for historians who are starting to research?

AM: Yes, I think the most important thing as a historian is to understand the theory behind the particular subject area that you are studying. This could be the theory of archival studies, it could be the theories to do with history, theories that has to do with legal history for example and in order to really bring out the information and to contextualise the information in the documents here it's absolutely essential to understand current theories around that research area because those theories can then be either applied to specific documents being looked at and indeed as a historian having done that, you then may be able to help further refine that theory, improve it or indeed come up with a whole new theory which other historians can work on in the future.

DA: Can you tell us any prospective projects you intend to conduct especially in our Archives?

AM: Yes, well there is this one character found in the documents who always fascinated me ever since I came across him. That is Vittorio Cassar who is an extremely interesting character, he was certainly very intelligent, he was certainly very interested in a lot of different things. We learn from him, from this Sellem trial in which he appears quite a lot, is the fact he was an architect in Malta at this time, he built lots of buildings within both Malta and Gozo but he was a bit of a naughty boy because he was very clearly involved in sorcery, magic, witchcraft all of this kind of thing, and as a result of this he was famous or perhaps infamous throughout the island for what he was doing and occasionally he himself was brought up before the inquisition accused of various, doing various things. he shouldn't have been doing. So what I would like to do is looking at all of the references about him from this archive and then actually go to the other archives which contain information at the National Library Archives and the Notarial Archives of Valletta as well, trying to get all the information on him really together and then produce a study which is related to a methodology which is becoming quite popular in the Mediterranean, and in global history recently to see the life of one person to use that life as a window into various different topics, various different ideas on what was happening not just in Malta but in the



Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral
11, Ange's Palace, Villegaignon Street, Mdina, Malta
E-mail: archives@metropolitanchapter.com
Tel: [00356] 21 450 303



Mediterranean more widely during the time. I think he a fascinating character and I definitely would like to understand exactly what he was doing and how it reflects into wider history.

DA: Well, that's it, thank you very much for your interview, for giving us a bit of your time from researching here. So, thank you very much.