The Infidels' Drink: Coffee Encounters and Transformations in Early Modern Malta

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Abstract: The early modern Maltese archipelago provides an interesting background to explore the pioneering nature of coffee consumption in the Catholic world. The coffee experience in Malta is rather unique, especially since its introduction happened through the interests of slaves captured during corsairing activities rather than the interest of European merchantmen involved in Levantine trade. Furthermore, the brew was quickly adopted by the common people of the urban towns who visited the slaves' prisons regularly to have a taste of this novel drink. Against this background, this study attempts to explore what could have intrigued the imagination of the Maltese when the brew was still relatively unknown on mainland Europe. The discourse related to coffee experiences will be discussed through the concept of 'embodied imagination': sensory perceptions, socio meanings and material culture.

In 1633, Inquisitor Martino Alfieri (1631-1634) issued a search order for a slave who was eventually apprehended in a shop where Muslims regularly gathered to drink coffee.[1] The shop formed part of the slaves' prison complex, one of the earliest references to a coffee-house in the small Mediterranean archipelago of Malta.

This lesser-known Maltese case-study presents several opportunities to explore interesting coffee-related trajectories. In order to gain further insight into the adoption of coffee in Malta, this study will provide a brief overview of the nature of coffee drinking during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is followed by an exploratory attempt to understand better how the drink gained popularity among all sections of Maltese society at a time when the brew was relatively unknown to large parts of Europe. The concept of 'embodied imagination' is here adopted as an analytical tool to investigate three different but interrelated vectors that shed light on Malta's early modern coffee experiences: material culture, social meanings, and sensory perceptions.

The Context

The Maltese islands are strategically located in the narrow channel separating Sicily from North Africa. Prior to the sixteenth century, Malta's state of isolation characterized its archaic cultural behaviours, with its own unique language and customs.[2] A fortunate change in the rule of the archipelago ushered a period of sustained growth and progress.

In 1530, the Order of the Knights of St John took over the control of Malta. Until their sudden departure in 1798, the Hospitaller Knights transformed the geographical and cultural landscape of the islands, as Malta's domestic and foreign policy came to reflect the ebb and flow of Mediterranean affairs.

New urban settlements surrounding the Grand Harbour altered Malta and the life of its inhabitants. By the first half of the seventeenth century, the harbour towns became multifunctional and cosmopolitan. The urban conglomerate of fortified towns, constituted by Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua, represented almost a third of the island's population. The significant concentration of people in this condensed space generated a sense of claustrophobia. The Maltese, and several foreigners, including a considerable number of slaves, shared a common space as the narrow streets and the main thoroughfares became theatres of transcultural experiences.

The sea that defined the physical boundary of isolation was gradually transformed into a bridge, linking Malta to the rest of Europe. The Order's naval prowess, coupled with fantastic harbour facilities, relocated Malta within Mediterranean affairs. The role of Malta's maritime influence was further enhanced through a brisk investment in corsairing activity. Corsairs generated an important source of income, as goods and humans were captured and sold in the Valletta market.

Coffeeways: A brief historical overview

Inquisitor Alfieri introduces the researcher to the earliest reference to coffeeways in Malta. Apart from a clear marker of Arab and Ottoman identity, coffee offered an element of respite to a considerable Muslim slave community during their forced stay in Malta. Coffee smells and tastes generated a sense of home-away-from-home among the slave community, eventually even transforming the slaves' prison into a coffee destination for the Maltese.

A sense of this transcultural experience is immediately elicited from the statement of inquisitor Alfieri, '... *in apotheca ubi Infideles solent bibere herba vulgo dicta café*' (a shop were Muslim slaves regularly go to drink an herb popularly known as coffee). Although Alfieri knew where the coffeeshop was located, he appears to be less informed about the infidels' brew since he describes it as an herb rather than a bean. However, he informs us of how the word *café* had already become part of the common vernacular by 1633. What remains certain is that the drink of the slaves seduced the spirits and the imagination of the working class, the knights, and other people of rank.

While coffee was still an exotic curiosity throughout Europe, the slaves' prison became a destination for the knights and persons of quality too. Travellers experiencing Malta as part of their Grand Tour visited the slaves' *bagnos* for a taste of the exotic brew. One distinguished guest was Baron Georg Friedrich zu Eulnberg, who in 1663 was accompanied by some knights to watch a slave prepare the ingredients for the brew which he then enjoyed.[3] It

appears that some slaves excelled in the art of preparing coffee and possibly had an element of control over the supply of the coffee drink.[4] Amid the sparse evidence, one could discern that the earliest coffee experience in Malta knows no high-class noble setting. The first coffee-house recorded in the documents was no centre of enlightened thought and lacked any form of exquisite setting normally associated with other contemporary coffee-houses located in some of the leading European cities such as Paris, London, Rome or Vienna.

Another important source was published in 1665 by the Maltese cleric, erudite scholar and traveller, Domenico Magri. The lesser-known scientific treatise *Virtu del Kafè* was published again in 1671 with a special dedication to Cardinal Francesco Maria Brancaccio.[5] The latter is better known for the assigned responsibility to provide the Pope with all the necessary information about another novel stimulant in Europe – chocolate. On the cover of the pamphlet, Magri indicates how coffee had just been recently introduced in Italy. However, when referring to Malta, Magri states how the brew was a '*...bevanda molto pratticata in questa mia Patria*' (a drink commonly consumed in my country).[6]

By the closing decades of the seventeenth century, coffee-houses became the new destination within Malta's urban fabric. Privately owned coffee-houses gradually substituted the service offered by the slaves' prisons. In 1663, the Frenchmen Albert Jouvin de Rochefort noted how some Greeks sold coffee in the harbour towns. Thirty years following this observation, the experienced French traveller Françoise Deseine again remarks how the coffeeshops of Vittoriosa and Valletta were serviced mainly by Greeks.[7] By the second half of the eighteenth century, coffee became an interesting business venture for several coffee-house owners. In 1784, coffee drinkers could taste the brew from one of the fifty-two licensed shops in the harbour towns.[8] Valletta alone had 25 coffee shops, an average of one shop for every seven hundred inhabitants in an area of 0.61km^2. This probably explains why the Norwegian priest Pavels, the Danish secretary of the Frigate Tetis, and the young sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen were sipping on coffee as soon as they entered the Grand Harbour in 1796, claiming how 'the coffee-houses in Valletta are easy to find.'[9]

Evidence of popular consumption was also reflected through the regular importation of the coffee bean to Malta. During the second half of the seventeenth century, coffee became a common occurrence among the wares that reached Malta.[10] The availability of the bean becomes more pronounced during the eighteenth century. In 1791, captain Gaetano Cini imported 800Kg of coffee from Castellammare di Stabia within the city of Naples.[11] Apart from brisk supplies of coffee beans reaching the island, a 1776 Chamber of Commerce report indicates how Malta exported coffee to other destinations including Sicily and Calabria.[12]

Coffee also enters the realm of sophistication around aristocratic tables.[13] The Grand Master employed a *garzone di cafè* [lit. coffee maker] among his Palace retinue.[14] Receipts of the Magisterial Palace contain references to payments for quantities of coffee beans

supplied through specific contracted merchantmen.[15] This attitude justifies the observation of the traveller De Bray who described Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan [1775-1797] as a coffee addict.[16] A series of recipes, probably penned by a Sicilian chef who served the Knights, includes coffee as the main ingredient. Apart from the *Modo di fare café in café* (a type of mousse) and *Biscotti di café* (lit. coffee biscuits), the 1748 *Libro di Secreti per fare cose dolce di varii modi* caters for those refined tastes interested to indulge in a coffee sorbet and a coffee ice-cream.[17]

Coffee was more than a drink. Coffee was also an idea.

Embodied Imagination

Food is intense. The need for food is so compelling that we are often 'consumed' by what we eat. In fact, cooking and eating could be viewed as a series of mental processes. Food is loaded with many abstractions, confirming Clifford Geertz's statement, 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.'[18]

The main aim of this study is to attempt to unpack aspects of these 'webs of significance' through the manifestation of 'embodied imagination'. Robert Bosnak coined the term to explain how people experienced their dreams both in the mind and their entire body.[19] Research in the field of neurogastronomy compliments Bosnak's theory since the perception of taste is a culmination of complex interactions of sensory and cognitive experiences. This aligns again with Geertz's understanding of how culture is 'a system of meanings embodied in symbols', providing people with opportunities to understand reality and animate their behaviour.

In search for novel experiences, humans become inspired by their need to satiate their curiosity, the need to discover and invent new experiences, the urge to imagine new ideas and translate these aspirations into realities. With every moment that a food is experienced, human imagination invariably influences those cultural meanings that generally aggregate food as prominent or despised. The need to imagine, forms part of the restless human psyche, the need to know the unknown, while seeking ways of perfecting the known. Against this background, an attempt is made to explore aspects of that process by which new products, in this case coffee, become what Mintz considered as, 'transformed into the ritual of daily necessity and even into the images of daily decency'.[20]

Material Culture

During the past decades, a renewed interest in material culture became evident in European food studies, with a focus on human behaviours and relationships with the material world. Along with the shift of focus to everyday practices, the kitchen has gained prominence as a topic of analysis. When objects are contextualised within their existing environment, these provide a confluence of meanings and shared values between the object, the person, and

the food prepared for consumption. Understanding the meanings behind the 'ecosystem of goods' highlights another aspect of the pronounced transition of Malta's coffee culture from the infidels' prisons into the broader public and private realm.

The transformation of a coffee bean into a drink does not necessarily require any specialised tools, although specific equipment was developed in association with the roasting, boiling and serving of coffee. Early seventeenth century descriptions of coffeeways by Westerners visiting Ottoman territories often limit their references to coffee pots and drinking receptacles, the latter generally described as China dishes or porcelain cups.[21] Probably, these early encounters with coffee receptacles refer to fine Turkish fritware.[22] Fine Turkish fritware travelled beyond the confines of the Ottoman empire, including Malta. In 2017, fragments of a coffee cup of a Kutahya origin were discovered within an unstratified layer of earth in the Inquisitor's Palace. A similar fragment was also found in a sealed archaeological context in a Valletta residence.[23] Another interesting find from the Inquisitor's Palace includes various fragments of a coffee drinking set delicately painted with a scatter of strawberries and sprigs. The set consists of cylindrical coffee cups and two types of saucers – possibly a *sous-tasse* and a dessert plate.[24]

Trying to understand how such objects travelled to eighteenth century Malta remains quite obscure due to the relative absence of archival evidence. The island's maritime activity, especially corsairing, served as a modicum for such products to reach the Maltese market. Such objects, possibly destined for other countries, were redirected to Malta through the activities of ship captains, such as Giuseppe Briffa. In 1793, at the helm of a corsairing vessel that has just returned to Malta following operations in the Levant, Briffa listed all the goods plundered from a Russian passenger sailing on a Greek ship. The list of confiscated items included two cups and two coffee pots.[25]

There is a strong connection, almost inseparable, between culinary objects and culture. 'The importance of any kitchen technology', argues Bee Wilson, 'goes beyond function and enters the realm of symbol.' [26] Therefore, any personal interest to own coffee utensils should also be viewed through the consumer's ability to imagine and recognise novel experiences.[27] According to Pietro Verri, those seeking the newest trends were also harbingers of the 'science of *savoir vivre*'.[28] Malta's aristocratic settings immediately introduces the researcher to those embodied meanings associated with coffee as an intangible form of culture through the tangibility of kitchen equipment. A 1759 inventory of the Inquisitor's Palace in Malta includes references to several coffeepots, a coffee grinder affixed to the kitchen wall and a coffee roaster. The Inquisitor also owned four *cuccumelli*, a maiolica receptacle that introduced a novel way of how to prepare coffee.[29] The eighteenth-century Neapolitan novelty poured the boiling water on the coffee powder resting on a fine sieve. The filtered liquid collected at the bottom of the *cuccumella* was then served, reducing the gritty feeling

one experienced when drinking coffee. Similar to the Ottoman fritware, the recipe book, and the porcelain cups and saucers, these culinary objects became symbols of sophistication.

The utensils used to prepare and serve coffee are characterised both by their utilitarian, as well as their symbolic meanings. Beauty and finesse enhanced the consumption experience. The glamorous objects reflected the socio-political position of their owners. The quality of the coffee service transcended beyond the practical purpose of containing the dark liquid. Even the aesthetic nature of the equipment, especially the coffee service, stressed the importance of the host. In the case of Malta, the refined utensils became a means that overshadowed the origins of coffee in Malta. The drink of the enemy was poor, drab, cheap and within the reach of many. Sophisticated tastes elevated the drink to a unique experience. Indeed, the 'ecosystem of goods' within the private realm of an aristocratic setting became another symbol of distinction.

Social meanings

Coffeeways provide interesting avenues to analyse the development of discourse, revealing how coffee could generate both a sense of conviviality as well as a weapon in power relations, a medium of social distinction. Understanding the social dynamics associated with the novelty of the infidels' drink in Malta is a great place to start looking into those connections between coffee and the politics of identity.[30]

An important component of Malta's urban society was formed by a considerable slave community, the most valuable item seized during corsairing activity. Slaves in Malta either belonged to the Order of the Knights of St John or to private individuals. Slaves could reside in one of the three *bagnos*, each found in Valletta, Vittoriosa and Senglea. Within these spaces, slaves could build their own little refuge supported by their own mosques and priests.[31]

The presence of slaves within the harbour towns could be easily discerned. The Maltese working class constantly found themselves sharing the same urban spaces. Dumont observed how by the end of the seventeenth century slaves roamed the streets of the city freely from sunrise to sunset.[32] Slaves were even permitted to earn some money of their own, including the selling of coffee as a drink.[33]

During the first half of the seventeenth century, the *bagnos* became a destination for those interested in experiencing a drink not readily available on the market. In this case, to what extent did the *bagno*'s coffee experience resemble the social experience of equality among the coffee drinkers in the coffeehouses of Constantinople? It is possible that during those fleeting moments of coffee drinking, the prison became a site of social and political rapprochement when the knight and the aristocrat was briefly decentred. However, one should approach such arguments with caution, especially since the rituals of the coffee-house culture of Constantinople must have contrasted sharply with the visitors' experience of the coffee service offered at the slaves' prison in Malta.[34]

Social distinction was much less clearly defined when considering the urban commoners. Many Maltese coffee drinkers existed on the fringes of urban society. Especially for the deserving poor, the coffee drink was less of a sensory experience and more of a temporary relief from hunger pangs. However, the popularity of the drink among the lower classes provided the slaves with some possible sense of belonging. When considered in combination with other opportunities toward 'integration', sharing coffeeways with the Maltese lower class provided an element of temporary relief from the hardships associated with slavery. This argument aligns with Sidney Mintz's conclusion with regards to slave societies in the Caribbean where the choice of culturally meaningful foods afforded slaves an element of human dignity and some sense of freedom.[35]

Nevertheless, the sale of coffee by members of the slave community was fraught with challenges. The prisons' coffee makers operated in an environment open for haggling with potential coffee drinkers trying to strike a good business transaction. To a certain extent, this behaviour represented a ritualised exchange. An accord had to be achieved between the coffee makers themselves, but also between the coffee maker and the customer. Potential coffee drinkers could go through several price negotiating sessions. These challenges were further accentuated when privately owned coffeeshops started to increase in the harbour towns. Thus, the slave coffee maker was exposed to situations which were rather different from those generated by licensed coffeeshops. The coffeeshop owner had a better sense of privacy, enjoyed the confidence and support of a regular clientele. The slave coffee vendor was more open to public scrutiny especially by the customers who sought any opportunity to take advantage of the social distinction. With little sense of 'social bonding', any business minded coffee drinker could have posed a threat to any slave using coffee as a means of generating some money. This also means that while coffee had generated some opportunity for identities to be blurred, socio-cultural meanings were constantly checked, used and possibly abused especially when contracting business with slaves.

The primacy of the slaves' prison as the main supplier of coffee grows significantly weaker by the end of the seventeenth century. The coffeeshop becomes another distinct feature of the urban streetscape. After that the slaves' prison democratized coffee drinking in Malta, coffee would start to lose its identity as the drink of the infidel. Slaves even met in the public coffee-houses rather than the *bagnos* during the eighteenth century.[36] Gradually, coffee became a daily fare, a transcultural experience for the cosmopolitan population of Malta's urban towns.

Sensory perceptions

When the natural philosopher Leonhard Rauwolf travelled to Aleppo in 1573, he described his first encounter with the drink 'as black as ink'.[37] For the English traveller George Sandys, coffee 'does not taste better than soot: burnt, bitter and gritty.'[38] There was no good smell to

the drink, argued diplomat George Manwaring, although he admitted its wholesomeness. According to William Parry, coffee tasted like medicine.[39] The English preacher William Biddulph held a similar opinion, concluding how the drink was not adequate to the tastes of his fellow countrymen.

Although taste is highly subjective, discourse employed in archival documents shed interesting light on the physical sensation of flavour and how this impinges on our food likes and dislikes. Sensory perceptions are culturally determined, interesting sites of study that inform another aspect of 'embodied imagination'.

Elisabeth and Paul Rozin adopted a psychological perspective when exploring the concept of acquired taste.[40] Flavour, according to the Rozins, is influenced by the familiarity of a community to a particular combination of ingredients found in the cuisine of a locality. The Familiar tastes, argued the Rozins, facilitated the historical introduction of exotic crops. Based on this reflection, it is here suggested that there were several culturally determined sensory perceptions that facilitated the adoption of coffee drinking among the Maltese lower classes.

Black appears as an unwelcome sight when related to food among early modern society. The colour has been associated with soot, ink, mould and burnt food. Black has also formed an integral part of contemporary discourse as another marker of social hierarchy. Food products, such as black honey or black bread, produced from poor and unrefined processes have been associated with the world of the lower classes. These culturally determined meanings must have also influenced the food-choice decision making process when presented with the dark drink. In the imagination of the lower classes, the colour of the brew appears less of a determining factor in the consumption of the infidel's drink.

The gritty feeling when drinking coffee seems to have produced an unwelcome sensation among all coffee drinkers. Magri informs the reader how after pouring the hot brew in a cup, one had to recite the Apostles' Creed before sipping the drink to allow any particles suspended in the liquid to settle at the bottom of the cup. This appears to have been important for the refined tastes of the elite. In fact, the preparation of coffee in the Neapolitan manner was less driven by the exploration of new tastes and more by the need to eliminate the gritty feeling experienced by coffee drinkers while sipping on unsettled coffee particles in the cup. The development of the *cuccumelli*, similar to those which were found in the kitchen of the Inquisitors' Palace in Vittoriosa, provide another clear example of how acquired tastes influence food-related behaviour among various consumers.

The addition of sugar and spices to imported stimulants, especially coffee and chocolate, generated an interesting debate among researchers. Anthropologist Ross Jamieson argues how any attempts by Europeans to exactly emulate indigenous practices was primarily a reminder of European colonial greatness.[41] Marcy Northern claims that such additives were not a process adopted by the Europeans to domesticate the bitter taste, but rather an attempt

to emulate indigenous consumption and as a substitute to ingredients that were unavailable to the consumer in Europe.[42] Both observations, amid their contrasting nature, cannot really fit the Maltese case-study. First, the Maltese have always been part of a foreign system and thus, any claims for colonial greatness are impossible to put forward. Secondly, Malta's culinary experience was primarily a product of the Mediterranean context, especially since the island depended on significant amounts of imported food products. The limited nature of the local varieties in coffee preparation is again clearly evinced in *Virtu del Kafè*. In fact, Magri suggests to anyone about to be initiated to the drink to consider the addition of sugar as a sweetener and coriander to improve the smell of the drink. Both products were available for coffee consumers, mainly those with refined tastes.

It appears that the Maltese urban working class had a favourable sensory perception, positioning them as better consumers of the unadulterated brew. There is consensus on the nature of food consumed by the majority of the urban populace, considered as drab and monotonous, limited in imagination and unrelated to the refined tastes and culinary interests of the more sophisticated classes. The availability of an additional means of sustenance was important for any urban community, where many invariably experienced hunger on a regular basis. Even though we have no evidence to indicate the cost of a cup of coffee brewed by a slave, the likelihood was that the cost was low. Any service offered by an infidel carried with it an amount of stigma and the potential to engage in lucrative business was simply made impossible. Evidence indicates how the sale of food and drink involved cheap products, mainly catering for the needs of the working society.

Even if the product was devalued because of the service provider, it appears that the lower classes enjoyed an acquired taste that explains why they did not question the qualities of the drink. First, the lower classes often consumed foods with textures that generated a similar feeling to the grittiness one experienced when drinking coffee. Bread made from mixed, poorly milled grains, already generated a semblance of a gritty sensation among the bread eaters. Such sensations were further neutralised when considering a diet that depended almost exclusively on coarse wholemeal bread. The second aspect was related to colour. As stated earlier, several dark food textures were associated with the lower classes. For instance, the colour of bread was an important marker of a person's social and economic standing. In Malta's early modern hospital, the lower classes were served brown bread, while black bread was exclusively reserved for the infidels. Consequently, the sight of the drink and its gritty sensation did not necessarily detract from the utilitarian primacy of the brew. The drink was wholesome, and thus it was considered as another cheap and filling experience, serving well the purchasing power of Malta's urban working class. These observations, coupled with the daily interaction between the slave community and the working class, provide a possible explanation to Domenico Magri's 1665 observation that the Maltese were already avid drinkers of coffee when the rest of Europe was still introducing the drink among a selected few.

Conclusion

Coffee drinking became a phenomenon of consumption in Malta at a time when large parts of Europe associated coffee with the 'Turkey merchants' of the Levant. When the medical properties of coffee were being considered as an effective marketing tool, the Maltese had already acquired a taste for the drink that transcended beyond their humoral needs.

The bottom-up approach transformed the exotic beverage into a normal dietary practise. The slave community introduced the experience, willingly sharing the brew with the many people with whom they commonly co-existed. Having their personhood and even their identity as human beings largely denied because of their social and political standing within a catholic community, Muslim slaves inevitably tended to seek any possible opportunity to relate to their owners. The early years of coffee drinking could be seen as a reaction and a self-affirmation in itself. This was especially the case for coffee makers since they played an emotional in the lives of their masters.

On the contrary, the knights would gradually continue to enjoy the stimulant mainly in a private setting. While emulating European trends, the Maltese nobility sought ways of how to establish distinction through material culture. The private ownership of coffee utensils continued to re-affirm the aristocracy's sense of its own cultural and biological superiority. This cultural mindset screened a rather ambivalent attitude: one wonders to what extent was coffee seen as an exclusivity of the enemy. Irrespective, apart from a means of distinction from the rest of society, it was as another form of perpetuating the social stigma against the slave.

Similar to the rest of Europe, coffee-houses popularised the brew as a public affair. This development transformed the coffee experience from the drink of the Muslim slaves into a drink that was defaced of any culture, religion, social standing, or identity. By the end of the eighteenth century, the direct association of coffee with the Muslim world in Malta fades away.

Notes

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