

Kostas Soueref

The Maltese in Corfu. An approach
to the history of departures and
arrivals

MALTESE-CORFIOTS

The transition of the Ionian Islands from French tutelage to British protection (1814-1815) brought general and politician Maitland, Governor of Malta and Commander of the Mediterranean, to Corfu as Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands (1816–1824), replacing the temporary General James Campbell. Maitland estimated that Malta was not in danger of being removed

from British rule, although it suffered from piracy, and he settled in Corfu.

One of the severe problems that Maitland faced was the plague, which affected Marathias and Lefkimmi in Southern Corfu. However, his primary concern was to tame the local aristocracy, which he considered corrupt and indifferent to the people, and to tie the Ionian Islands and their islets to Britain's chariot. He

adopted a deceptive Constitution (1817) and practiced censorship. Ioannis Kapodistrias strongly protested to the great powers of the time, in London and St. Petersburg (1820), regarding the non-respect of the terms of the Treaty of Paris and the Congress of Vienna, specifically the lack of freedom for the Ionian Islands under Maitland and Britain, the violation of the Constitution, the abuse of power, and the

lack of transparency in economic matters.

Unlike his fellow countrymen, Maitland did not support the Greeks in their struggle; he advocated for neutrality and punished with exile and confiscation of property any involvement from the Ionian Islands, which secretly supplied food, weapons, and money or accepted refugees. In 1819, he ceded the British possession of Parga to Ali Pasha for 15,000 pounds, prompting

the Souliotes and Pargians to flee to Corfu, the latter bringing with them the ashes of their ancestors. He supported the use of the Greek language instead of Italian and allowed the Ionian Academy to operate in embryonic form, although he mocked its founder, Guildford (Frederic North, 5th Earl of Guildford, 1766-1827). Nevertheless, the Palace he erected for his residence reflects Greek themes in many ways, both in terms of

neoclassical style and the shields of the seven islands of the Ionian Sea.

The first Maltese immigrants arrived in Corfu voluntarily between 1815 and 1816, encouraged by the British and following the Governor, in search of a new life. Prosperity had waned in their homeland, where they faced the pressures of unemployment and overpopulation. Maitland was, of course, a guarantee for them as they

sought work.

Maitland, the ruler of Malta, the Ionian Islands, Cyprus, Constantinople, and Smyrne, consolidated British interests in the Mediterranean. His strict governance opposed the independence movements in the Ionian Islands, arguing that such independence would jeopardise financial support from the central authority. Approximately five thousand British

while the Constitution imposed by Maitland, along with his personal interventions in the Council and the controlled representatives of the Ionian Islands in the House and Senate, solidified the unlimited power he wielded (1817).

Maitland, who originally resided in the Old Fortress, in the building of the Venetian governor-generals, disarmed the inhabitants of the Ionian Islands, reformed the administration and tariffs,

reduced corruption, improved infrastructure, and constructed fortifications and new buildings. He also established the Knightly Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, with the Grand Master being the Commissioner, as well as the honorary medal of the same name (1818), awarded to distinguished Ionian, Maltese, and British knights. His influence, evident through architecture, remains almost indelible in Corfu, particularly with

the construction of the Palace, dedicated to Saints Michael and George. This palace served as the seat of the Order of Knights, the British administration, and the Ionian Senate, as well as the luxurious residence for "King Tom," the High Commissioners, and their guests, until the end of British protection.

Maitland's friend and collaborator, Lieutenant Colonel George Whitmore (1775-1862), head of

Royal Engineers in Malta (1811-1829), designed and implemented the landscaping of the Spianada in Corfu and the monument honouring the Commissioner. The nobles of the area decided in 1816 that the monument would take the form of an arch; however, it was inaugurated in 1821 as a peristyle, situated over a Venetian cistern, featuring twenty columns of Maltese stone in the Ionic style, with artistic contributions

from Pavlos Prosalentis.

Whitmore's most significant work was the Palace of Saints Michael and George, located on the northern side of the Spianada, on the site of the old Venetian military hospital. It was characterized by the Ionian State Gazette as the largest palace in Greece before the construction of King Otto's palace, which took place between 1836 and 1847. Otto visited the Palace of Corfu

in 1833, the first year of his reign.

The Palace exhibits influences from European neoclassicism, particularly from the works of Robert Adam (1728-1792), and falls into the late phase of 19th-century Georgian British architecture in the Regency style. The outer columns draw inspiration from the Doric style of the Parthenon, while the inner columns reflect the Ionic style of the temple of Athena Polias in

Priene. Inside the halls, materials such as mahogany from Italy and Austria, a variety of marbles from European countries, and silk from Lyon were utilized. Two gates to the east and west are named after Saint Michael and Saint George, respectively.

Whitmore's collaborators in the construction of the palace and the oversight of materials included Ionian army engineers Philippos

Petritsopoulos and Ioannis Batistas Parmazan, as well as the Corfiot sculptor Pavlos Prosalentis (1784-1837), who contributed to the artistic decoration. The foundation stone was laid on St. George's Day, April 23, 1819, and the Palace was inaugurated on the same date in 1824, after the people of the Ionian Islands had borne the costs.

The illustrious

stone of Malta found its way across the Ionian Sea to Corfu, destined to serve as the very foundation of the Palace. This Maltese limestone, with its warm, light brown tones and variable textures, garnered admiration for its remarkable properties—retaining the sun's warmth through the chill of winter while bestowing a refreshing coolness during the swelter of summer. Thus, it came to be

celebrated as "the true wealth of the island."

Accompanying the precious shipment were master builders, foremen, and skilled stonemasons, along with Maltese artisans whose craftsmanship was renowned. United in purpose, they collaborated with local labourers, imparting their knowledge and techniques. Among them were the esteemed sculptors Vincenzo and Ferdinando Dimech, who, alongside Pavlos

Prosalentis, meticulously crafted the sculpted and embossed emblems that adorned the edifice—symbols of Great Britain (a female figure accompanied by a lion), Corfu (a serene maritime representation), the seven islands, and an array of intricate decorations that spoke to the grandeur of the undertaking.

This influx of Maltese artisans, many accompanied by their spouses from Malta and

the villages of Gozo, coincided with the construction of the Palace between the years 1819 and 1824. Initially, their number swelled to around eighty, soon followed by others—a clear reflection of Maitland's strategic vision. His ambition encompassed not only the commercial exportation of local limestone to foreign shores but also the immigration of “reliable” Maltese builders, labourers and farmers. This initiative

sought to alleviate the pressures of a burgeoning population in Malta in the years after the plague. The British Governor of the Mediterranean appeared intent on establishing a new homeland for the Maltese, ensuring their descendants would continue to contribute to British interests in these expanding territories.

A subsequent migration, recorded in 1831 during the tenure of the esteemed Frederick Adam,

unfolded along a more arduous path. At the behest of Charles James Napier, the locum tenens known for the eponymous garden in Argostoli, Kefalonia, two hundred seventy-eight farmers from Gozo were relocated to Argostoli in 1826. The endeavour, funded by benefactors Vincenzo Bugeja, a prominent Maltese businessman, and Ioannis Papafis, a Thessaloniki merchant residing in Malta, sought

to spare the state treasury from the burden of this mission. Yet, this group of Maltese, cast into isolation by the hostility of their new surroundings and beset by destitution, ultimately reached Corfu, thanks to the benevolence of Adam.

“Numerous” Maltese evokes a vibrant image of mid-19th century Athens, where it was noted that the crews engaged in archaeological excavations in the

capital between 1850 and 1870 included Maltese individuals, whose versatility rendered them invaluable as interpreters, carriers, and purveyors of sustenance. The waves of migration that swept the Maltese across the Mediterranean brought them to the bustling ports of Piraeus and Patras, where they engaged in commercial ventures and port labour, weaving their legacy into the fabric of maritime history.

In the wake of the tragic Chios massacre of 1822, a poignant reversal of fate unfolded as refugees journeyed from Chios to Malta. This exodus hints at the existence of connections and trade ties between the two islands, perhaps spurred by the coveted mastic that flourished in their lands. Moreover, a notable influx of Greeks sought sanctuary in Malta, a fact underscored by the establishment of a Greek printing house in 1827

and the formation of a Consulate prior to 1830.

The British authorities, in their administrative wisdom, facilitated the resettlement of Maltese from Malta and Gozo, guiding them to cultivate a new colony beyond the fortifications of Corfu. This settlement was strategically located to the west of the bustling commercial square of San Rocco, nestled south of the industrial precincts of Mantouki, amidst the fertile expanses of

Platytera, Koulines, and Solari. The historic Union of the Ionian Islands with Greece in 1864 heralded a cessation of migrations from Malta. Yet, paradoxically, some Corfiots of Maltese lineage, bearing British citizenship, embarked on journeys to Cardiff in Wales and to Izmir. According to archival records, the community had burgeoned to approximately a thousand souls by the dawn of the 20th century, tracing its roots

back to an initial wave of forty families.

The older Maltese, devoted in their veneration of Saint Paul, known as "San Papoulio", and Saint Spyridon, the revered patron of their newfound home, played a vital role in the cultivation of sweet potatoes, the raising of rabbits, and the enhancement of the economic, political and social tapestry of Corfu. Their active participation in processions, bearing the heaviest torches,

epitomized their integration into the local culture, both before and after the Union of the Ionian Islands with Greece and throughout the tumultuous years of the World Wars. Despite the challenges they faced as perceived "foreigners," their transition into urban vocations, including pioneering the use of motor vehicles in Corfu, unfolded with remarkable fluidity and vigour.

Yet, the decree issued during the German

occupation—an edict that faltered in its timely execution—sought the expulsion of the "Maltese," a community of 562 individuals who still bore the mark of British citizenship. This decree emerged in the wake of the deportations of Corfiot Jews to the grim Nazi concentration camps, a chapter of history that would not easily fade from memory.

In the present day, the descendants of those

Maltese settlers, now the seventh generation, number over two and a half thousand, their lineage woven into the very fabric of Corfu, though only the names of their vanished community linger in the landscape. The society of Corfu, along with the broader Greek milieu, has undeniably thrived through the integration of these Maltese descendants, the majority of whom have embraced Greek citizenship. While the

Maltese tongue has succumbed to the passage of time, the Catholic faith continues to resonate within this community, and the bonds of mixed marriages have flourished, further intertwining their heritage with that of the island.