

THE COTTON TEXTILE INDUSTRY IN MALTA

by

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Bosio has left us the following description of the welcome given by the Maltese to Grand Master L'Isle Adam: "One could see the majority of the Maltese, even the upper classes, all bearded. Their beards, according to the custom of the time and place, were long and thick. All wore a kind of suit reaching down to their knees ("il-geżwira"). They were apparelled wholly in local cotton, which thrives greatly in the Island". Indeed, during the Middle Ages our ancestors depended on locally spun cotton material to clothe themselves from head to foot. We cannot determine when it was that our farmers decided to do away with linen for the planting of cotton. A Mayr,² without adducing any evidence, says that cotton was introduced into Malta in the IX century by the Arabs. It appears, at any rate, that after the XIV century, Maltese cotton found good foreign markets for on the 19th July, 1414, King Ferdinand ordered that two or three officials be nominated to examine carefully the cotton earmarked for export by the Maltese. These officials were instructed to have the cotton bales clearly marked to indicate the pure quality of their contents.³

The export of cotton from the Maltese Islands flourished increasingly. This can be gathered from the fact that in 1472, a tax of two per cent was raised on the exported product, the money to go towards the upkeep of the walls of Mdina.⁴

In 1492, following a request made by the Università itself, the Viceroy, D. Ferrante de Acuna, laid down that every year on the feast of St. Martin six officials were to be chosen, experienced in the cotton business, but at the same time with no self-interest in its commercial aspects. Their duty was to fix prices and levy taxes on the spun material.⁵

The Maltese Government jealously guarded the cotton trade, and it was very concerned lest other countries should acquire control of the cotton market. It was with this in mind that many statutes (called *Bandi*) were enforced directing the local population not to allow the cotton seed to be exported to other countries.⁶

1. G. BOSIO, *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illma. Militia di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme*. Vol. III, p. 89 (seconda impressione).

2. A. MAYR, *Die Insel Malta im Altertum*. (München 1909), p. 21.

3. See the document published by A. MIFSUD, "L'Approvvigionamento e l'Università di Malta nelle passate Dominazioni" in *Arch. Melitense*, Vol. III, pp. 228-229, "Frodi nel commercio dei Cotoni Maltesi".

4. A. MIFSUD, *Ibid.*, p. 129.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

During the sojourn of the Knights of St. John in our Islands, the cotton trade rested solely and wholly in Maltese hands, since the Hospitallers, as a religious body, were not permitted by their Statutes to indulge in commerce. Under the Order, more laws were laid down establishing cotton prices, the payment of a sum of 10 per cent advance money on every order made by foreign businessmen, and lastly exemption from local customs duty as an incentive, so that the cotton industry, which was a considerable source of wealth for our Islands, might develop still further.⁷ In 1732, Grand Master Manoel erected two hostels near the Floriana bastions to accommodate the aged of both sexes, and he ordered another block to be built for poor girls, adjacent to the women's quarters. The females, both young and old, spun cotton, and the Grand Master allotted them half the profits that accrued from their labours.⁸ Even Grand Hompesch, on 31st July, 1797, nominated a commission to determine whether, for the year, the cotton industry was prosperous enough to keep the whole population of Malta and Gozo occupied and to ensure that the industry was profitable all round. Likewise the French Government and, later, the first British Commissioner in Malta, Sir Alexander Ball, did their utmost to ensure that the cotton industry continued to flourish.⁹

And now let us deal with the cultivation proper of the cotton plant.

In Botany, the cotton plant is known as *Gossypium*. Three kinds of cotton plants were cultivated in Malta:—

a) *Red Cotton* or *Gossypium religiosum*. Our forefathers used to describe it as "a wonder of nature". This plant developed a rust coloured boll and, when spun into yarn, its colours remained fast even after washing. The Maltese called this kind of cotton "Tan-Nankin". Its seed requires fertile soil with plenty of moisture, and the plant when fully developed, reaches the height of a man. It seems that this particular type has long since disappeared from our Islands.

b) *White cotton with a yellow tinge* or *Gossypium hirsutum*. This also requires deep, fertile and humid soil. When sown in clay or loamy soil, although it does in fact grow, this type of cotton does not produce very good results. This cotton was known as "Ta' Gallipoli". Its leaf is patterned differently from the native cotton brand, and because of its short fibre, it has to be mixed with long-fibred cotton to ensure that the spun material is strong enough.

c) *Gossypium herbaceum*. This is coarser and the spun yarn rather more fibrous. It needs less water than the other two. The Maltese claimed that merchants from Barcelona sought this kind of cotton in particular because it was best suited for dyeing purposes. When, in 1764, the cotton gin was introduced into Europe and the spinning jenny or "two-cylinder wheel", as it was called, was set aside, this last type of cotton, owing to the shortness of its fibre, started diminishing in importance.

The three types of cotton mentioned are sown in mid-April and the plants reach maturity in late August or early September. Where rich soil

7. *Ibid.*

8. V. AZZOPARDI, *Raccolta di varie Cose*, p. 129, "Ospizio Invalidi".

9. See A. MIFSUD, *Ibid.*, p. 193.

is available and where it is not very cold, the plant produces cotton for three successive years, provided it is pruned yearly in April.¹⁰

At the beginning of last century, a new type of cotton was introduced and sown in the Maltese Islands. This is known as *Gossypium barbadense*. Because it was brought to Malta by Padre Carlo Giacinto,¹¹ the Maltese nicknamed it "Ta' Patri Karlu". As this plant thrives without much water and its ratoon period is longer than that of the other three, it was, for a time, given preference by the local farmers.

In this century, an attempt has been made to introduce a long-fibred type of cotton which, in view of its length, is more sought after, since it can be worked better. This was known as *Sea Island*, the best cotton in America. It did not prove successful here, however, because by the time the plant bears fruit Autumn has set in, and rain moisture ruin the crop completely.¹² The same difficulty was encountered with the long-fibred Egyptian cottons like the Mitafifi, Mawbari, Abassi and Gordon Pasha.

The Maltese also tried the Egyptian cotton known as *Sakellaridis*. This required a lot of water and the local farmers considered that it was not profitable enough. In 1942, the American cotton known as *Upland Long Staple* was tried out. This is a "white, long and fine-fibred type of cotton, cultivated like the Maltese crop in arable land but yielding a more abundant product and became popular in foreign markets."¹³ This experiment was very successful but the modern farmer is no longer interested in cotton. The old generation still recalls with pride the beautiful fields of cotton one could see in the old days. They all mention *Il-Fiddien* and say that the place was so called because it looked like a large carpet of silver.

The following articles of clothing were produced from cotton: bed linen, table linen, mats, scarves and stoles, ties, handkerchiefs, stockings, hunters' vests and all kinds of clothes and underwear.¹⁴

At the beginning of last century, the usual price of Maltese cotton was 30 'skudi' per 'qantar'. White cotton sold at 32 to 35 skudi per 'qantar' and the red variety, because of its fineness and natural colour, fetched from 45 to 50 skudi per 'qantar'.¹⁵

There was no wastage in cotton cultivation. The seed, which fetched 8 skudi per 'qantar', was one of the best kinds of fodder for cattle, sheep and goats. It fattened cows and rendered their meat white and palatable, especially when the seed was mixed with forage and hay. It also helped sheep and goats produce purer milk. The rest of the boll and stalk

10. See *Breve dettaglio della maniera onde nell'Isola del Gozo si coltivano le vettovaglie, il cotone, ed i legumi* submitted by Dr. Salvatore Gumbo to Lt. Col. I. Otto Bayer (in possession of Giorgio Mas'ni of Gozo).

11. Padre Carlo Giacinto was a Discalced Carmelite and Professor of Botany in the Royal University of Malta. He left two books: *Saggio di Agricoltura per le Isole di Malta e Gozo* Malta, 1825 whence much information concerning the plants of these Islands, especially the cotton plant, may be gathered.

12. See J. BORG, *Il-Qoton ta' Suja twila*, Maltese Dept. of Agriculture, 1980.

13. *Ibid.*

14. See N. ZAMMIT, *Esposizione di Industria Maltese nel 1864*, for the articles exhibited in London in 1861, pp. 131-132.

15. See P. CARLO, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

was used for heating ovens and cooking food since stone-hearths were more often used than stoves.

Malta's cotton trade was carried on mainly with the following countries: Greece, Italy, France and especially Spain¹⁶. The Spanish merchants even lived as a colony in the place still known as 'Balzunetta', which is a corruption of Barcelonetta, "the little Barcelona".

From the Customs Office registers, it appears that between 1788 and 1793, Malta exported about 27,500,000 French francs worth of cotton. According to Boisgelin¹⁷, if one included the yarn used in wearing apparel for the inhabitants of these Islands, the figure would amount to three million francs, or £150,000.

Lt. Gen. Cockburn: *A Voyage to Cadiz and Gibraltar up the Mediterranean to Sicily and Malta in 1810-1811*, Vol. II, p. 112-113, wrote "On the 5th of May, I went to Civit  Vecchia. The cotton manufacture is in a large building, it was established by the late bishop, and an abb , who directs the concern: it is extensive, and a variety of articles are made, from common rubbers to coloured carpets; but I think it will not answer long, the demand is small, the prices great, and consequently little money comes in". And E. Blaqui re, *Letters from the Mediterranean*, London 1813, Vol. II, pp. 275-277, visiting Malta in 1812, had to stay the following on the local cotton industry: "The staple commodity of the island, and for which it has been celebrated from the remotest antiquity, is cotton: of this there are two qualities, white and coloured; both are still cultivated to a certain extent, although greatly depreciated in value by the introduction of British and foreign manufactures. There are several private looms employed all over the island, at Citt  Vecchia a very extensive establishment is formed, and gives constant employment to several hundred indigent females, so that every encouragement should be given to the only charitable institution outside the walls of Valletta. It is, however, said, that the mode of administering this, is by no means unexceptionable, and that independent of a wide departure from original rules, a marked partiality is observed in the choice of those who are taken in. This circumstance, if true, is highly reprehensible, and rendered still more so when I state, that the place owes its foundation to the benevolence of an individual named Saura, after whom it is called. Besides the females who are provided for, there is an ample provision made for several old men; who, from extreme age or debility, are no longer enabled to live by the exertion of their industry. When we consider that our arrival and continuance here has nearly annihilated a source of national wealth, which had for ages been the principal support of the whole population, and yielded a very considerable revenue to the government, it is but just that an equivalent should be made to the sufferers."

What caused the disappearance of this industry from our Island? We cannot deny that it vanished because cotton began to be produced on a

16. ETON, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

17. L. BOISGELIN, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, Vol. I, p. 109. In the Inquisitor's Archives, one finds also two registers kept for the import and export of cotton: *Libro della filatura dei cotoni di Malta dal 1^o aprile, 1797, fino il 15 agosto, 1797*, and *Libro filatura dei cotoni di Levante dal di 16 agosto, 1797*.

large scale in India, Syria and Egypt. Our country, being so small, could not possibly compete with such large producers. Then, of course, the invention of the spinning jenny revolutionized the trade. On the one hand, the man-in-the street demanded machine-produced goods which appeared more attractive than the hand-made article; and, on the other, the aristocrats encouraged the expansion of luxury textile manufactures by slaves. But these are not the only causes. On the 7th November, 1816, the Malta Government abolished the regulation already referred to, that the bales of local cotton had to be clearly marked by customs officials as a guarantee of the first class, pure quality of the contents. Now, the dealers themselves did the "stamping". Moreover, on the 18th November, 1822, a Government proclamation allowed every kind of linen and cloth to be imported into our Islands. On the 3rd November, 1837, every tax on imported cotton was removed. The Government had issued these regulations on the advice of the merchants themselves who thought that this would be of benefit to the trade of the Island. But they were proved wrong; foreign cotton of the worst quality was imported and nobody wanted to buy flabby, ragged, low-priced clothes made from such inferior material.

Counter measures were taken: the merchants were asked to import Brazilian cotton; the Government greatly reduced the price of local cotton and customs duty on it was almost totally removed. These steps to re-establish our cotton trade however, proved fruitless. A number of excuses were brought forward, mainly that Maltese cotton was found unsuitable when processed by machinery. But, we must honestly mention that our merchants were really following a get-rich-quick policy and no longer provided their customers with the pure product; instead, they mixed local cotton with inferior types.

The result of all this was that the remarkable cotton produced here which had been acclaimed as "a wonder of nature" is no more, and the most important industry of our land was allowed to dwindle into extinction.