

THE ANDREW P. VELLA MEMORIAL LECTURE 1999

**ENLIGHTENMENT AND PROPAGANDA:
PROHIBITED LITERATURE IN MALTA
BETWEEN 1700 AND 1798**

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The lecture, based upon on-going doctoral research, focused upon the presence in Malta of literature prohibited on religious or political grounds during the period 1700 to 1798. The local dissemination of such material was by no means an eighteenth-century innovation. The availability of Lutheran works is documented during the early decades of the sixteenth century, while prohibited classics, comprising the works of Nostradamus and Galileo are known to have reached the Island during the following one.

During the first decades of the eighteenth century, that is even prior to the full flourishing of the Enlightenment, a steady growth in the amount and variety of illicit literature available in Malta may be discerned. The publication, in 1726, of Vertot's celebrated *Histoire des Chevaliers Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem* ... constituted a landmark of fundamental importance due to its scathing attacks on past Catholic sovereigns in general and on popes in particular. Notwithstanding its condemnation by both the Order and the Congregation of the Holy Office, copies of Vertot's *magnum opus* still circulated in eighteenth-century Malta.

During the second half of the century, members of the Order as well as Maltese of different social backgrounds became increasingly familiar with prohibited literature of different genres. Works by the most notable exponents of Enlightenment philosophy, particularly by Voltaire and Diderot not only formed part of private collections but eventually found themselves within the Order's own *Biblioteca Pubblica*. Even more commonly available was the ever-increasing tide of popular Enlightenment literature in the form of novels,

pseudo-biographies, satires and sexually explicit works by such authors as Boyer d'Argens, Mercier and Mairobert amongst others. Enlightenment scientific literature in the form of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and of works discussing Mesmer's theories of animal magnetism also reached the Island.

The identification and analysis of the availability of prohibited literature in eighteenth-century Malta leads naturally to the question as to what extent did such literature influence the local population's religious and political perceptions and the formation of Maltese public opinion in general. In Robert Darnton's words, 'By discovering what books reached readers throughout an entire society and (at least to a certain extent) how readers made sense of them, one can study literature as part of a general cultural system [...] the history of books opens onto the larger field of the history of communication.'¹

¹R. Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (London, 1996).