



# Malta: the Struggle to Preserve Language and Literature



By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
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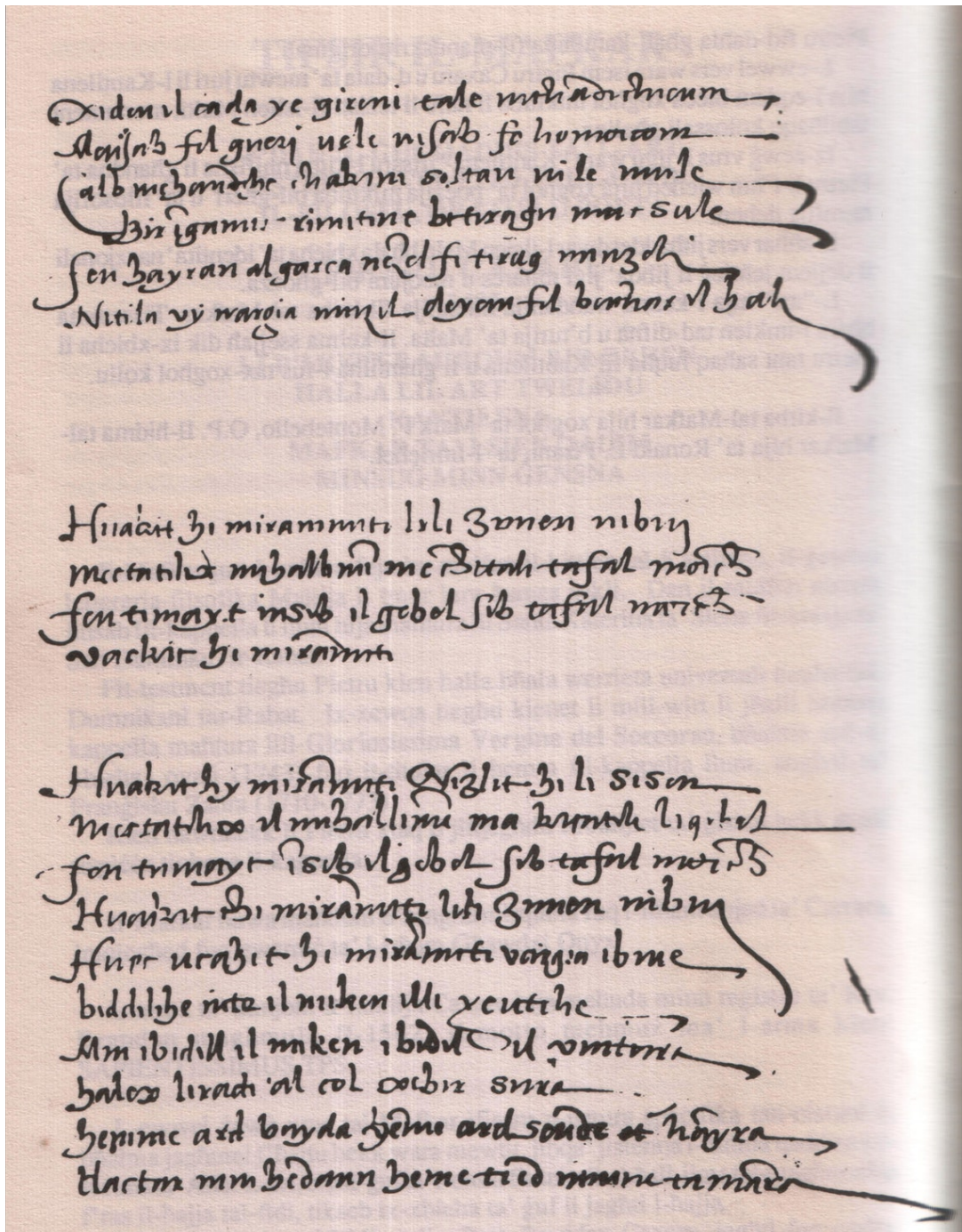
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Besides the fact that it's a beautiful island in the middle of the Mediterranean, how much do we really know about Malta? You may remember it's where the Knights of Malta spent some time between the 16th and the 18th century. Comic book

aficionados will be familiar with the fact that [Joe Sacco](#) was born in Malta. But did you know, for example, that in 2018 the island will be the [European Capital of Culture](#)? Or that every August a literature festival is held there? And that three Maltese authors, [Immanuel Mifsud](#), [Pierre J. Mejlak](#), and [Walid Nabhan](#) recently won the European Prize for Literature?

The language they write in, of course, is Maltese, which is derived from an Arabic dialect that was spoken in Sicily and Spain during the Middle Ages. It sounds like Arabic with a smattering of Italian and English thrown in, and it is written in Latin script, making it the only Semitic language to be inscribed this way.



A page from Il Cantilena

A 15th century poem called “Il Cantilena”, by Petrus Caxaro is the earliest written document in Maltese that has been preserved. In the 17th century a French knight wrote the first Maltese dictionary, which served to give orders to soldiers, and, to be fair, includes notes on the local grammar. But Maltese, which has evolved and integrated other languages along its historical way, has struggled and continues to struggle to survive. (A large number of Maltese are effectively tri-lingual, speaking Maltese, English and Italian.) After Malta became a member of the European Union in 2004, Maltese was recognized as an official language, with just under 450,000 speakers, but because Malta was also a British colony from 1813 until its independence in 1964 about 20% of the language is now derived from English. It is therefore a very difficult language to translate, and literary translators are few and far between.

[Claudia Gauci](#), a poet and teacher who is involved with the [Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival](#), held in collaboration with the European network [Literature Across Frontiers](#) and other partners, says that the festival was created in order to build a bridge between Malta and other Mediterranean communities. "Our literature has gone through a voyage," said Gauci. "At first, it was patriotic, then in the 1960s there was a new wave of writers who were revolutionary. They questioned their identities also in relation to Malta and what it represented to them."

The emergence of women writers is also a fairly recent development; well established authors include [Maria Grech Ganado](#), Rena Balzan and Doreen Micallef. Emerging and promising authors are, among others, [Clare Azzopardi](#), Leanne Ellul and Nadia Mifsud, all rising up and out of a traditional society.

"Today, the concerns of a generation of writers," said Gauci, "go deep within the essential human being, addressing themes such as immigration but also issues that are threatening to our welfare and country such as the environment and the sad reality it is facing."

Lastly, says Gauci, identity remains something Maltese like to ponder. It is fitting, then, that Walid Nabhan, a Jordanian-born Palestinian who moved to Malta and now writes in Maltese, won the European Union prize for literature this year. In his novel, he tells the story of a Palestinian who has spent his entire life outside his homeland and for whom the themes of identity, exile and displacement, have dominated his life.

Editors and translators Marco Galea and Albert Gatt, in an essay on the Maltese literary scene, begin by explaining that in Malta, "the very existence of a 'literature' can be put into question. The problem is not only that in a country with a population barely exceeding 400,000 people, the domain of the literary is inevitably limited by the laws of probability, making this a... 'minor' literature almost by definition." The authors add that the lack of a body of translated Maltese literature means that it is not "in the other's field of vision", and that this awareness in the greater picture is felt deeply by Maltese writers. It also stems, the authors suggest, from Malta's location on the periphery of Europe's borders.

That said, prize-winning poet Maria Grech Granado writes that in looking at the current scene "we can state with conviction that never has there been so much literary ferment in the Maltese islands since the sixties."

Maltese-language authors may be part of a tiny, self-doubting and difficult-to-translate group, but they are an enthusiastic and passionate one. All the more reason to explore their writing. A reading list is forthcoming and for more information about Maltese literature and the literary festival that takes place the last week of August, click [here](#).

*Cover image courtesy BLR Antique maps*

## Tags

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clare azzopardi

walid nabhan

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maltese language



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