

INSTITUTE OF TOURISM STUDIES  
HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN TOURIST GUIDING

**Meaningful Journeys to St Paul's Grotto: The Visitors' Experience c.1650-  
c.1750.**

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**John Paul Chircop**

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## **Abstract**

The Grotto of St Paul in Rabat has enjoyed an important position as an internationally renowned shrine for Christians for several hundred years. It attracted visitors from all over Europe, reaching a climax in the 17th century, through the efforts of the Order of St John. These visitors made the journey for a broad continuum of reasons, reflecting their interests, professions and beliefs, and so they experienced the grotto very differently. This research sought to analyse travel accounts from the period c.1650-c.1750 and shed light on the various motivations of visitors to the Grotto, by structuring them into three distinct groups: devotees, artists and tourists. A complex, pluralistic reality was revealed, demonstrating overlapping motivations and interests, very much like those of 21st century visitors to the Grotto. The outcome of the research helped design a themed tour of Rabat placing these fascinating travellers from early modern Europe into the spotlight.

Keywords: St Paul's Grotto, pilgrimage, motivations, travellers.

## Declaration of Authenticity



**Student Name and Surname:** John Paul Chircop

**Student ITS Number** : 1901658/1

**Programme** : Higher National Diploma in Tourist Guiding

**Research Title** : Meaningful journeys to St Paul's Grotto: the visitors' experience

c.1650-d.1750.

### Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Christine Jones

Date: 24<sup>th</sup> January 2023

Signature of Student:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J.P. Chircop', is written below the signature line.

## **Acknowledgements**

The completion of this study would not have been possible without the continuous guidance and vast insight of my tutor and mentor Dr. Christine Jones.

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## 1. Introduction

The Grotto of St Paul in Rabat has been venerated for a very long time, and references to the cave go back to documents written as early as the 14th and 15th centuries. A visit to the Grotto, traditionally believed to be the place where St Paul the Apostle was incarcerated was a journey that touched upon different aspects of the human self. It was considered as a spiritual and physical healing program. It was a place where the faithful prayed and rock from the cave was believed to be imbued with special properties, an effective antidote against poisoning and many other maladies.

By the end of the 16th century the Grotto was catapulted to international fame through the efforts of the Knights of the Order of St John, who leveraged their patronage of the shrine to help cement their fame as ambassadors and protectors of the Christian faith throughout Europe. The Order instrumentalized the Maltese Pauline cult for its own glory, circulating pamphlets and handbills in several European countries. Soon, the Grotto of St Paul became a widely known and important destination for pilgrims across the continent. Between 1588 and 1589 no fewer than 940 foreigners visited the island, many of whom paid a visit to the Grotto (Freller, 1996, p.88). Subsequently, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries Malta and the Grotto kept attracting a significant number of visitors, including French, Italian, German, Spanish and English people. Visitors hailed from all walks of life and much like the myriad of visitors that converge annually on Christian places of pilgrimage such as Santiago de Compostela and Lourdes, they were tourists too.

In recent decades, the subject of foreign visitors to the Grotto has attracted new research, shedding more light on the individuals that made their journey to Malta specifically to visit St Paul's Grotto. This was the starting point of this research study. I embarked on this subject aroused by the curiosity to learn about who exactly these people were, and why they undertook the journey. This long essay will argue that contrary to common belief, visitors to the cave were by no means only pilgrims driven by their faith. It will seek to illustrate that these people came from a variety of backgrounds and attempt to group them into broad but distinct categories to collate a novel view of the research to-date. This study will then (i) use this structure to highlight the different ways the journey was meaningful to visitors between the middle of the 17th and 18th centuries, and (ii) throw a spotlight on several of the motley of motivations behind these visits.

## 2. Literature Review

The available information about the visitors to the Grotto and their motivations is scattered over a variety of sources. These are principally in the form of published accounts written by the travellers themselves, as was customary in the Baroque period, shedding light on their impressions of the place and what they remarked as noteworthy. A significant number of these manuscripts have been digitised and made publicly available by the libraries where they are kept. While these primary sources are written in different languages reflecting the origin of the writers, several of these have been translated into English by contemporary authors who have used them for their research. A diverse selection of these traveller accounts, including their corresponding translations were used for this study. Additionally, this literature review has also considered the principle contemporary authors who have written about the Grotto of St Paul, whose publications provide suitable secondary bibliographical sources to assist the objectives of this study.

### 2.1 Devotional Visitors

Over a hundred years ahead of the period under study, in 1536 came the first printed description of Malta by the French priest, traveller and scholar **Jean Quintin D'Autun**. He includes a description of St Paul's Grotto, highlighting its importance and connection with the Apostle: 'Near the city there is a cave dug in a rock... they say Paul was in custody in it for three months along with other prisoners, healing at the same time the islanders... and calling them to Christ by his preaching' (Vella, 1980 cited in Freller, 1996 p.72). **Marc'Antonio Haxac**, a Maltese surgeon on the galleys of the Order of St John, wrote a '*relazione*' highlighting the Pauline cult in Malta to Cardinal Verallo in Rome at the start of the 17th century. His manuscript mentions that the Holy Grotto was Malta's first church. Additionally, Haxac calls out the miraculous properties of its stone, suggesting it was already popular all over Europe due to the 'numerous pilgrims' who visited the Grotto in a similar way to pilgrims who visited 'St James in Galicia' (Azzopardi & Blondy, 2012 p.134).

Travellers accounts from the start of the period being studied reflect what Freller (1996, p.130) describes as an 'extraordinary level of devotion to the Apostle'. The Jesuit priest and scholar **Athanasius Kircher**, whose '*Mundus subterraneus*' became one of the most influential books on natural science in the 17th century, visited the cave in 1637 while on an 8-month stay in Malta (Freller, 1996 p.133). His description of the qualities of the earth extracted from the Grotto illustrates the prevalent supernatural beliefs: 'this earth... efficient for diseases of a venomous nature... cured not so much through natural means as through the favour and blessing of St Paul, and as one may piously believe, it is rich in power.' (Kircher, 1665 p.359). In 1639 a Frenchman named **Jean Coppin** was returning from Egypt to France, stopping over

in Malta for six days. Even though he greatly admired the city of Valletta, Coppin describes the Grotto as Malta's most precious site: 'but the most remarkable thing in Malta and also the most venerable is the Grotto of the great Apostle of the Gentiles... one excavates a white earth which is a never-failing remedy against poison and fevers' (Coppin, 1686 p.361).

Devotional visitors to the Grotto also commented about the relics of the saints within, an important part of the experience for pilgrims. This was the case for **Johann Breithaupt** from Germany, who after his visit of 1624, praised the altar containing these relics as 'the treasure of St Paul' (Breithaupt, 1632 p.154). Frenchman **Albert de Rochefort** mentions in his account: 'the small church above the cave of St. Paul is remarkable because of its collection of holy relics, amongst which.. is the arm of St Paul.. I had never seen a small church that has so many holy relics.' (Rochefort, 1663 cited in Freller, 2009 p.378)

## 2.2 Artists

In the 17th and 18th centuries, several were the foreign artists who included Malta in their travels, guided by their interest in art, documenting verbally but also graphically the sites which struck a chord with them.

In 1632 German painter **Joachim von Sandrart** was in Malta and wrote about the Grotto in his travel account: 'there is also shown a Grotto in which St Paul has allegedly lived.. this however is questioned by Cluverius' (Merian, Zeiller. p.47 cited in Freller, 2005). Similarly, in 1664 the Dutch poet and artist **Willem Schellinkx** arrived in Malta and showed great interest in locations traditionally associated with the Saint, also carrying out two drawings of the Grotto (Freller, 1996 p.96). Additionally, Schellinkx thought of including in his manuscript a reproduction of a printed handbill about the miraculous stone of the cave (ibid., p.144).

One of the most important visual records of Malta's sights from the period are from renowned French artist **Jean Houel**. Houel made two trips to Malta in the middle of the 18th century, and his tour of the island included a visit to the cave. On his second visit in 1777 he was accompanied by compatriot **Antoine Favray**, another artist whose work can still be seen in many Maltese localities. Houel is reported as taking a keen interest in the Grotto and the surrounding area (Freller, 2013 p.30). In his account of the visit, Houel immediately draws attention to the statue of St Paul the Apostle, which he attributed to the great Roman sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The French artist appreciated the statue's qualities considering it one of the sculptor's better works, describing it as 'carried out with much expression and fire'. Houel goes on to add that the statue stood out above all the other artefacts in the cave: 'the only thing worthy to see in this place'. Only then does Houel provide a mention of a spot in the cave from where rock dust was scraped by devotees, adding 'they are convinced that this powder is a most powerful remedy' (Houel, 1787 p.110). On this trip, Favray takes the



opportunity to show Houel his own paintings, which the young artist appreciated in no uncertain terms (Degiorgio & Fiorentino, 2004 p.170).

### 2.3 Tourists

Late in the 17th century, Malta had become an important stop on the European '*giro*' undertaken by travellers for their own education but certainly also for entertainment. By the mid-18th century, several were the wealthy Britons who paid a visit to Malta for private pleasure and cultural education (Freller, 2009 p.23).

One such account is from Scottish traveller **Patrick Brydone**, who visited Malta in 1770. The author provides a descriptive account of all the sites he toured with the help of local guides. Brydone followed an itinerary of places including the Grotto of St Paul, which he described as 'exceedingly damp' (Brydone, 1773 p.127). His guides explained that many boxes of the rock from the Grotto were exported to far flung corners of the world, and so made sure to help himself to some: 'we did not fail to stuff our pockets with this wonderful stone'. Nevertheless, the author expresses some scepticism: 'I suspected they [the guides] would have prevented us, as I did not suppose the saint would have worked for heretics'. Additionally, Brydone did not seem impressed by the qualities of the powdered rock: 'it tastes like exceeding bad magnesia, and I believe has pretty much the same effects.' (ibid., p.128). Brydone goes on to mention other myths associated to the place, but once more some concerns are apparent: 'The saint cursed all the venomous animals of the island, and banished them forever.. whether this be the cause of it or not, we shall leave to divines to determine' (ibid. p.128).

French engineer **Charles Sonnini** was a widely travelled man who had been in several continents, prior to making his way to Malta in May 1777. Sonnini was a naturalist and was accompanied by a member of the Order around the most important sites. Taking interest in the Grotto and the properties attributed to its rock, Sonnini provides some critical observations: 'all its properties are confined to the production of a slight sudorific effect'. Later in his account, his strong scepticism about the myths connected with grotto emerges, attributing their popularity to gullible or ill-educated people: 'it is difficult to undeceive that class of people who explain natural facts by miracles' (Sonnini, 1800 cited in Freller, 2006 p.215).

### 2.4 Contemporary scholars

A few contemporary researchers have researched and written about different aspects of the Grotto, providing a scholarly perspective of visitors and their motivations.

The late Mons. John Azzopardi published numerous articles and curated multiple volumes about the Pauline cult in Malta and the Grotto of St Paul in Rabat. Azzopardi's research includes seminal work tracing the history of the Grotto since medieval times, the meteoric rise

in international popularity by the sixteenth century, and the various elements of the Pauline tradition in Malta (e.g. Azzopardi, 2011; Azzopardi & Freller, 2010). This author's work highlights why the Grotto is considered the first church of the Maltese islands (Azzopardi, 2009) and its inextricable position in Malta's identity (Azzopardi & Freller, 2010). His works emphasise the link between Malta and the visit of the Apostle, throwing a spotlight on the Pauline tradition, re-asserting its relevance: 'Images of Paul are for Malta, as powerful as our national colours' (Azzopardi & Pace, 2010 p.5). Azzopardi traces how the increasing devotion to the Pauline cult, aided by the Knights' efforts, raised Malta's standing in the eyes of Europe, leading to many more pilgrims visiting the island (Azzopardi, 2011; Azzopardi & Blondy, 2012). Distinguished ecclesiastical visitors since late medieval, into modern times and to the present day are also brought to light in his work (Azzopardi, 2011; Cassar & Zammit, 1990).

Thomas Freller wrote extensively about foreign visitors coming to the Grotto, putting together a comprehensive monologue specifically about this topic (Freller, 1996). His research collated a variety of mentions of the cave from a wide selection of travel accounts, illustrating these people's origin and background. The material is organised in a chronological order, which also gives a glimpse of the changes in the Grotto's visitors' perception over time, reflected in their writings. This shift becomes apparent in his book about Malta and the Grand Tour (Freller, 2009), where Freller suggests that as time went on, and especially after the start of the 18th century, the Grotto became less of an object of devotion to travellers, and much more a subject of curiosity. The author goes on to say that gradually irony and scepticism replaced old legends and traditions, with visitors being drawn to the place for the sentiments it evoked, rather than due to the devotional aspects of the shrine. Freller mentions that aside of pilgrims, visitors also included students, scholars, diplomats, and noblemen on their educational tours. This proliferation of secular visits by the end of the 17th century was due to Malta becoming one of the best-known places of fascination included on many travellers' itineraries, principally due to the Knights' presence on the island (ibid.)

Numerous reports and travelogues from the 17th and 18th century included a mention of a visit to St Paul's Grotto. Freller (1996) points out that most 17th century visitor reports follow the format of a '*relazione*', where the emphasis is on factual information, with little space for personal views or subjective comments. Conversely, Muscat (2018) argues that these accounts are highly subjective reports which reflect the writer's personality, cultural background, experiences, and biases. She maintains that travellers' reports were in fact influenced by the individuals' traits, circumstances, and duration of their visit on the island (ibid.). The existing literature about early modern visitors largely follows the same trends, giving descriptions which appear generic with insufficient insight into the diverse motivations that drew these people to the shrine. By revisiting and restructuring visitors' reports this study

aims to draw the individual travellers' views on the numerous possibilities that may have compelled them to make the journey to St Paul's Grotto.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter explains the methods used to gather data for the purpose of this research. The principle aim of this study is to explore the motivations that spurred Early Modern visitors to travel to St Paul's Grotto. It also seeks to understand the different ways in which the visit was meaningful to them. The best way forward to conduct this research was through a qualitative literature review. A systematic approach whereby select information from both primary and secondary sources was extracted, analysed, evaluated, and categorised, proved to be the most effective method in synthesizing what the collection of data reveals on the motivations that drove early modern travellers to the grotto and draw some ideas on how it was meaningful.

#### **3.1 Sources**

The basis of this qualitative research was a data gathering process from a range of bibliographical sources. The first step consisted of a thorough exercise to consult the material that has already been written about the subject of visitors to the Grotto. It was established that only a few academics have delved deep into the topic. Through their publications, a chronological catalogue of travel accounts of visitors to the island was obtained. Several of these primary accounts were accessible in digitised format from online libraries. In multiple cases, translations of these travelogues or reports were required and found either as a complete text, or as quotations in different sources.

All the gathered data was examined in detail to start identifying possible reasons for which travellers in the past undertook the journey to the Grotto. Reports were cross referenced to highlight differences amongst them. For instance, some just included a brief mention of the myth of the Grotto's stone, others focused on the artistic artefacts in the Grotto that captured their attention, while others wrote personal observations throwing doubt on the tales surrounding the Pauline tradition in Malta.

The travel accounts which were selected for mention in the study reflect the diversity of these visitors. Accounts were chosen in the period c.1650 to c.1750, as this time marked significant changes in the socio-political context of the islands. The revival of religious pilgrimages brought about by the Counter Reformation gradually gave way to influences brought about by the Enlightenment. Visitor accounts spanning this period often reflect this transition, which helped identify the main themes around which to structure this study.

Academic publications about the subject organise accounts chronologically or according to anecdotes characterising singular narratives. To address the gap in the research and shed a spotlight on the visitors' motivations, three categories of visitors were chosen to structure the outcome of the analysis. Based on the consulted literature, these groups illustrate the main

distinctions in motivations to visit the Grotto depending on the reasons for their journey. 'Devotional visitors', 'Artists' and 'Tourists' were the three categories selected to guide both the Literature Review and the Analysis. This structure was deemed suitable to bring a new perspective of visitors' experiences to the Grotto in the Early Modern period, expanding the knowledge dimension on this theme.

### **3.2 Limitations of this study**

Several of the visitors' accounts considered for this study are written in a range of foreign languages, reflecting the travellers' origins. Additionally, the language used in these reports is often archaic and a solid grasp of the context, such as the writing styles of the time is required to identify more precisely the meaning which the author was trying to convey. The finite time available together with the space constraints restricting the depth of the analysis were the principal limitations of this study.

The motivations of tourists, irrespective of their religious beliefs, are often complex and varied. In fact, the overlapping motivations of faith-based tourists is a topical subject being researched by contemporary scholars (e.g.: Cassar & Munro, 2016), providing avenues for more insights into the similarities of past and present visitors to religious shrines.

## 4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion chapter organises the information gathered according to the outlined methodology around three broad classes of visitors. For each group of visitors, the analysis depicts the contrasting ways how the journey to St Paul's Grotto was meaningful, and additionally it seeks to illustrate the distinct motivations behind their tour.

### 4.1 Devotional Visitors

In the context of the Counter-Reformation, St Paul's Grotto became the recipient of concerted efforts to promote it as a place of pilgrimage for visitors all over Europe. Ecclesiastical authorities positioned the life of St Paul as justification for missions to spread the gospel in the New World. The Order of St John and local clerics made sure to use the Pauline tradition to raise Malta's profile and cement its role as a bulwark of Christianity in the hostile Mediterranean Sea (Azzopardi & Freller, 2010).

Since the early days of Christianity, pilgrims have undertaken challenging journeys to holy sites in various countries. Such journeys were important for pilgrims in the 17th and 18th centuries for the same reasons as those which spurred on people many centuries earlier. These travellers sought to give honour to God and look after their souls in accordance with their spiritual beliefs. Like several other pilgrimage sites, the Grotto of St Paul was extraordinary as visits were rewarded by indulgences, in consonance with the concessions made by Pope Paul V in 1611. The Order's publications about the Grotto raised the profile of the site, advertising the spiritual rewards that one expected to receive when visiting the cave. Therefore, numerous pilgrims travelled to the Grotto in the same way they made their way to other famous shrines like Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrims would make the journey hoping to receive the divine intervention of the Saint, such as cures against illnesses or maladies which afflicted them or their loved ones. The fundamental belief and driving force for pious travellers in the Baroque period was that visits to the Grotto of St. Paul underwent a unique and powerful influence exercised by the Saint in this specific place (Freller, 1996).

A devout Jesuit, **Kircher** made sure to attend Holy Mass at St Paul's Grotto, accompanied by Inquisitor **Fabio Chigi** (Freller, 1996). As a practicing Christian, Kircher would have been compelled to spend time praying in this holy shrine, possibly reflecting on biblical teachings and how he felt he was faring in his spiritual life. With a keen interest in natural science and caves, a visit to the Grotto must have been especially meaningful for the priest and scholar. Not only was the site an important place of worship for Christians, but the beliefs regarding the supernatural properties of the cave's rock intrigued Kircher, who went on to mention it in '*Mundus subterraneus*'. Kircher is unequivocal about the fact that there was the Apostle's

direct blessing behind the rock's properties, adding that its power was beyond the understanding of devotees who visited the Grotto, and must have come from God (ibid).

Similarly, **Coppin**, a layman, illustrates his extraordinary level of devotion to St Paul in his travel account. At a time when most travellers were fascinated by Valletta, the modern city of the Knights, it was the Grotto in Rabat which he considered as Malta's most important site. Coppin appears to have been in awe of the place, and like other devotional visitors, the journey could have led him to feel closer to the divine powers of the Saint.

The presence of important relics in the Grotto made the experience for believers more meaningful, helping to attract visitors in accordance with the ideas surrounding relics in places of worship. When describing the altar where the relics were kept, **Breithaupt** asserts that this was truly 'the treasure of St Paul' (Breithaupt, 1632, p.154). After his visit to the Grotto, **de Rochefort** mentions specifically the relic of the arm of St Paul, acknowledging how important it was. In Baroque times, it became fashionable to touch saints' relics, as these helped believers feel closer to the spiritual influence of the saints. For de Rochefort, these relics of the Grotto could have been a catalyst to help him meditate about the inevitable day of judgement when his body expired. The journey on the footsteps of St Paul was especially meaningful for devotional visitors, an opportunity to learn more about the Saint's life, helping them model and shape their life as Christians.

## 4.2 Artists

For European artists, the journey to Malta was meaningful for very different reasons. In the aftermath of the Council of Trent, Baroque art occupied an important role in the Roman Catholic church's strategy to bring congregations back into the fold. In the 17th century, the paintings and artistic artefacts in the Grotto became much more than simple artistic representations to inspire devotional visitors or educate the illiterate. It was believed that the statues and paintings were linked with the divine power of the Apostle (Freller, 2006). Artists attempting to meet the increasing demand for art from the church travelled as necessary, for inspiration from existing work and to network with other experts and benefactors. For instance, **von Sandrart** arrived in Malta in 1632 primarily to study the works of Caravaggio on the island (ibid.). His descriptive account of the cave includes some sceptical remarks about the association of St Paul with the Grotto, giving the impression that his visit was motivated by reasons other than faith (Merian Zeiller, cited in Freller, 2005). For the German painter and several artists in the 17th century, a visit to the renowned Grotto was part of a meaningful journey seeking to accommodate the need for visual art in the Baroque age. Von Sandrart also supplied drawings to scholars such as **Merian** and **Zeiler**, who were documenting famous places and used the illustrations in their publication '*Topographia Italiae*', which helped make

them very influential geographers of the time (Freller, 2005). Just like von Sandrart, these authors were after recognition and the economic benefits that their work would produce.

By the 18th century, some interesting developments in the tastes of art became apparent in Northern Europe. There was new revived interest in the classical Greek and Roman period, and the art of antiquity came into fashion, considered to be superior to what contemporary artists were producing (Freller, 2013 p.x). This led artists to travel to places where Greek and Roman art and architecture was still plentiful, so the island of Sicily came into the limelight. Numerous artists added Malta to their itineraries to capture the most famous sites in their paintings and drawings. **Houel** had already cemented his reputation as a landscape artist when he travelled to southern Europe to frame sites from classical times in his illustrations. In his report about St. Paul's Grotto, his observations primarily concern the artistic qualities of the artefacts within; he was impressed by the sculpture of the Apostle. Led by fellow painter **Favray**, the tour they undertook together was principally motivated by their common occupation and interest. This is corroborated by the fact that Favray also showed Houel his titular painting of St Cathaldus in the chapel nearby. It is reasonable to suggest that these two artists would have been studying and comparing the artwork, attempting to discover opportunities for new commissions or even getting acquainted with local art patrons. Meeting the art market's appetite based on current trends was obviously important to artists' livelihoods, making a visit to the ancient Grotto a meaningful opportunity. Freller (2013) reports that on his return to Paris, Houel's main source of income came through the sale of his paintings, such as those featured in his '*Voyage Pittoresque*'.

#### **4.3 Tourists**

Visitors to the Grotto falling under this category had various backgrounds, such as students on their educational tours, scholars interested in natural science, and wealthy merchants visiting for pleasure, so their motivations differed accordingly.

Particularly up to 1700, distinguished people would commonly undertake a tour of Europe as part their education across several disciplines, such as diplomacy, politics, and languages. This educational tour was the last practical part of the schooling programme for young men from noble and rich families. Upon completion of the 'Grand Tour' or '*giro*', these men were prepared to take up important positions in upper echelons of society, with suitable knowledge of international affairs, making them good candidates to hold military or political posts (Freller, 2009). Following the Great Siege of 1565, the Order of St John had created interest in the archipelago through a flood of reports spread all over Europe, many of which extolled the achievements and military exploits of the knights. Like several other reports, **Haxac's** *relazione* included an extensive description of the links between Malta and Paul the Apostle, with the



Grotto and its qualities featuring centrally. Such pamphlets painted a picture of Malta being a 'chosen' place, raising Malta's profile all over Europe (Azzopardi & Blondy, 2012).

By the 17th century, Malta had become one of the fascinating places of the educational Grand Tour. Upon their arrival, members of the Order would accompany the visitors to the most important sites, which invariably included the Grotto in Rabat. Visitors on their tour were expected to complete a detailed diary stressing important places. This was intended to reflect the visitor's education and credentials, serving as an important resume for future reference (Freller, 2009). With its reputation in the Christian world and as an important element of Malta's identity, a visit and mention of the Pauline shrine in these diaries was highly desirable. In 1664, **Jacques Thierry**, a fifteen-year-old boy from a privileged Dutch family embarked on his four-year Grand Tour through England, France, Italy and Malta. Thierry was accompanied by his mentor, the writer and artist **Willem Schellinkx**. Azzopardi (2016) suggests that one of Schellinkx' responsibilities was to chronicle Thierry's travel diary, in accordance with the customs of the age. Schellinkx' diary narrates that the two travelled on a donkey to the Grotto in Rabat, and it was during this visit that the artist drew his elaborate sketches of St Paul's church and the Grotto (Freller, 1996).

Later in the 18th century, developments in the Mediterranean led to the Order and Malta losing much of their allure for visitors on their educational tours. The Ottoman empire was no longer a threat and military campaigns nearby were mostly a relic from the past. New educational institutions set up in European countries supplanted the need to undertake educational tours. Nevertheless, this period coincided with a new kind of visitor arriving in Malta. Freller (2006, p.214) states that in this time 'one can notice a shift from pious devotion to mainly curious or scientific interest'. Affluent travellers, like modern-day tourists paid a visit to the island, motivated purely by their interest in foreign lands. Guided tours following a pre-planned itinerary became common, and a stop at St Paul's Grotto was included in several of these.

Freller gives examples of travellers (like for instance the sophisticated Lady **Elwood**, wife of a high-ranking British army officer) for whom the trip was meaningful because they were 'interested in the Romantic effects and sentiments evoked by the place' (2009., p.379). For these travellers a trip to Mdina and Rabat gave a nostalgic insight into the more archaic side of the island, contrasting greatly with the modern cities of the harbour area (ibid.). These characteristics must have piqued travellers' curiosity as they got a glimpse of a world that was rapidly disappearing.

**Brydone's** account illustrates that not unlike modern day tourists, non-pious visitors to the Grotto were interested in taking back mementos from the shrine. Just like Brydone, **Sonnini**, a very well-travelled man, was highly sceptical about the traditionally believed supernatural

attributes of the cave's rock. Nevertheless 18th century travellers had a passion for coins, printed materials, and geological specimens, and so Brydone 'did not fail to stuff [his] pockets with this wonderful stone' from the cave, as a souvenir of his visit (Brydone, 1773 p.128; Freller, 1996).

For these tourists, the famous legends surrounding the rock made the cave an important site to check-off their travel list. Additionally, the Grotto attracted significant interest because it was so deeply connected with the history and culture of the island. Tourists were readily accompanied by local guides to the shrine, and this work provided them and the carriage operators with an important source of income (Donath, 2004).

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to portray the contrasting ways in which different visitors experienced the Grotto. It is important to recognise that the outlined motivations are not exclusive to each group. Devotional visitors were also motivated by curiosity about the site, or interest in the arts. Conversely some non-pious visitors were still interested in objects associated with the religious cult, like Schellinkx' reproduction of the Grotto's handbill included in his account.

Revisiting the different narratives on early modern visitors' accounts revealed a complex, pluralistic reality that steers history away from believers or non-believers, sceptics and non-sceptics. A myriad of diverse motivations drew people from all walks of life to the cave traditionally believed to be the place where the seed of Christianity in Malta was sown and sprouted.

## 5. Conclusions

For in their hearts doth Nature stir them so,  
Then people long on pilgrimage to go,  
And palmers to be seeking foreign strands,  
To distant shrines renowned in sundry lands.  
-Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

This study has illustrated the different ways in which distinct groups of travellers to the Grotto of St Paul in the 17th and 18th century experienced the shrine, exhibiting contrasting motivations and reasons why the journey was meaningful to them. This grouping highlighted a more complete depiction of the foreigners who made their way to the shrine, and the broad range of motivations behind their trip.

For devotional visitors, the journey to the cave of the Holy Apostle was very important. They believed that a visit would bring them closer to the influence of the Saint himself, attaining his blessings. The faithful made the journey hoping to obtain divine intervention such as cures against illnesses or disease. Catholic pilgrims believed that their visits to the shrine were rewarded through indulgences, reducing their time in purgatory upon their passing. Devotional visitors were also motivated by the prospect of seeing and touching holy relics of the Apostle, which were venerated as saintly objects.

However, not unlike those of today, visitors to the Grotto were certainly not all pilgrims! Artists including renowned painters made the journey to observe the art of the famous shrine and capture the site in their work. Research suggests that they were motivated by the potential to get more commissions from the Church, and to sell their illustrations of Malta back in their home countries. Travellers on their educational grand tour wanted to include a mention of the famous Grotto in their diaries. Their records constituted evidence of the important places they visited when being considered for important positions in the upper echelons of Europe. Conversely, some scholars undertaking the journey were motivated by the opportunity to obtain samples and examine the acclaimed rock of the Grotto, which was believed to have medicinal properties against venomous bites and creatures. Other tourists just wanted to take back some rock from this shrine as a mere souvenir. Ultimately the Grotto, an ancient site etched into Europe's cultural memory evoked the curiosity of many travellers, irrespective of their beliefs and backgrounds.

Travellers' accounts from three hundred years ago demonstrate overlapping motivations and interests, so the boundaries between groups of individuals is not always clear. Parallels can

be drawn with the interests of visitors from the present. Contemporary scholars emphasise that modern-day pilgrims to ancient shrines combine religious motives with interest in the heritage they visit, desiring to experience something that will add meaning to their lives (Collins-Kreiner, 2018). Further research unearthing the practical conditions faced by travellers of old would help better reveal the human experience of our predecessors, helping contemporary visitors to relate.

The Grotto of St Paul in Rabat is the focal point of the Pauline tradition in Malta, a central part of the island's cultural identity. The Order of St John made the Maltese Pauline shrine famous all over Europe. Over the past decades, new research has shed more light on the foreigners who made the journey to the cave. This study has illustrated that these people, who hailed from different origins and backgrounds, experienced the shrine very differently from one another, and were spurred on to make the visit for an entire continuum of reasons. Armed with this knowledge, guides to the Grotto can provide guests with a more colourful picture of past distinguished visitors, on whose footsteps they now follow.

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## Appendix 1: Illustrations

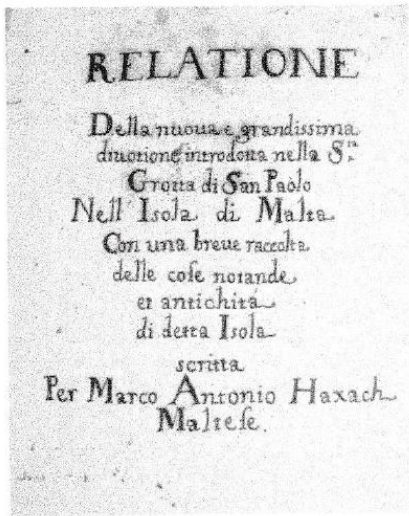


Figure 1: Marc'Antonio Haxac's Relazione to Cardinal Verallo

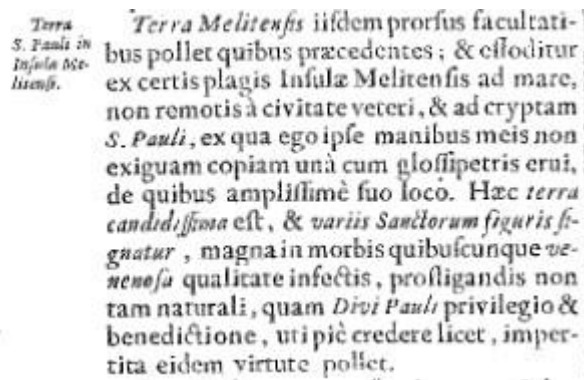


Figure 2: Athanasius Kircher's mention of Terra Melitensis

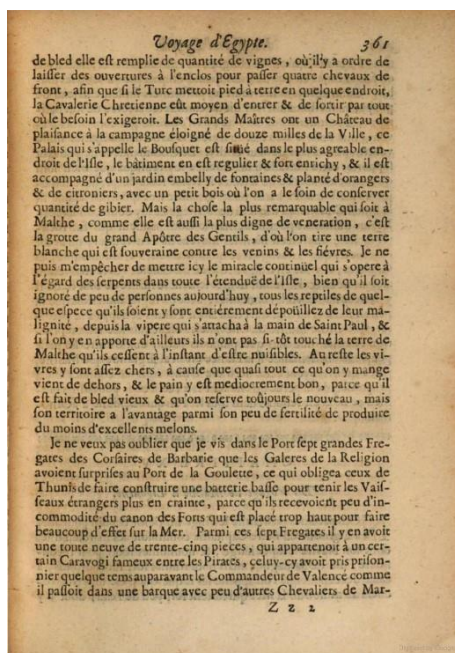


Figure 3: Jean Coppin's account

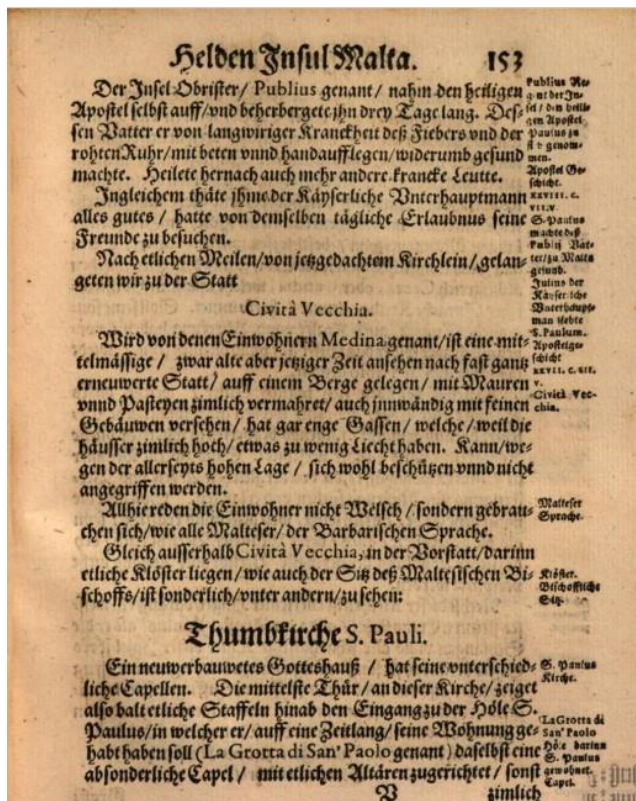


Figure 4: Breithaupt's account

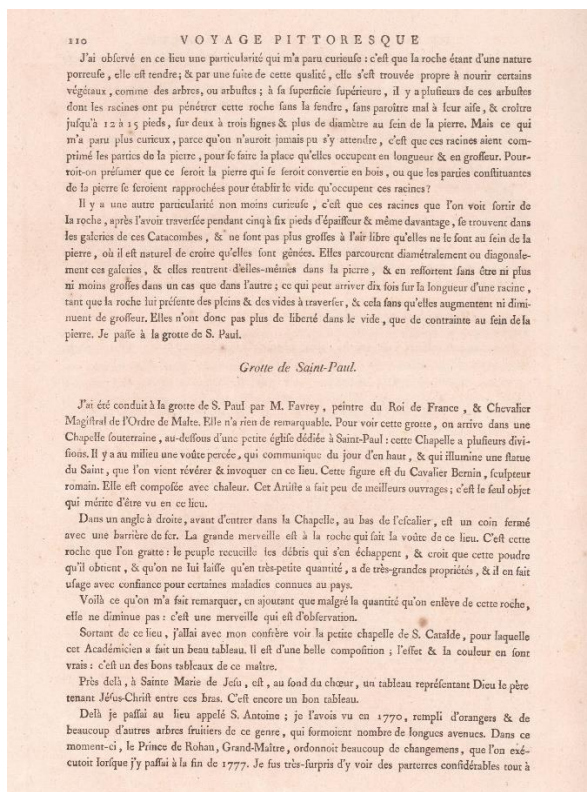


Figure 5: Jean Houel's account of this visit to the Grotto, accompanied by Antoine Favray



They are said to extend for fifteen miles under ground; however, this you are obliged to take on the credit of your guides, as it would rather be risking too much to put it to the trial. Many people, they assure us, had been lost in advancing too far in them, the prodigious number of branches making it next to impossible to find the way out again.

From this we went to see the Bosquetta, where the grand master has his country palace; by the accounts we had of it at Valetta, we expected to find a forest stored with deer and every kind of game, as they talked much of the great hunts that were made every year in these woods. We were not a little surprised to find only a few scattered trees, and about half a dozen deer; but as this is the only thing like a wood in the island, it is esteemed a very great curiosity. The palace is as little worth seeing as the forest, though the prospect from the top of it is very fine. The furniture is three or four hundred years old, and in the most Gothic taste that can be imagined; but, indeed, the grand master seldom or never resides here.

The great source of water that supplies the city of Valetta, takes its rise near to this place, and there is an aqueduct composed of some thousand arches, that conveys it from thence to the city. The whole of this immense work was finished at the private expense of one of the grand masters.

Not far from the old city there is a small church dedicated to St. Paul; and just by the church a miraculous statue of the saint with a viper on his hand, supposed to be placed on the very spot on which the house stood where he was received after his shipwreck on this island, and where he shook the viper off his hand into the fire without being hurt by it; at which time, the Maltese assures us, the saint cursed all the venomous animals of the island, and banished them for ever, just as St. Patrick treated those of his favourite isle. Whether this be the cause of it or not, we shall leave to divines to determine (though if it had, I think St. Luke would have mentioned it in the Acts of the Apostles), but the fact is certain, that there are no venomous animals in Malta. They assured us that vipers had been brought from Sicily, and died almost immediately on their arrival.

Adjoining to the church, there is the celebrated grotto, in which the saint was imprisoned. It is looked upon with the utmost reverence and veneration; and if the stories they tell of it be true, it is well entitled to it all. It is exceedingly damp, and produces (I believe by a kind of petrification from the water) a whitish kind of stone, which they assure us, when reduced to powder, is a sovereign remedy in many

Figure 6: Brydone's account

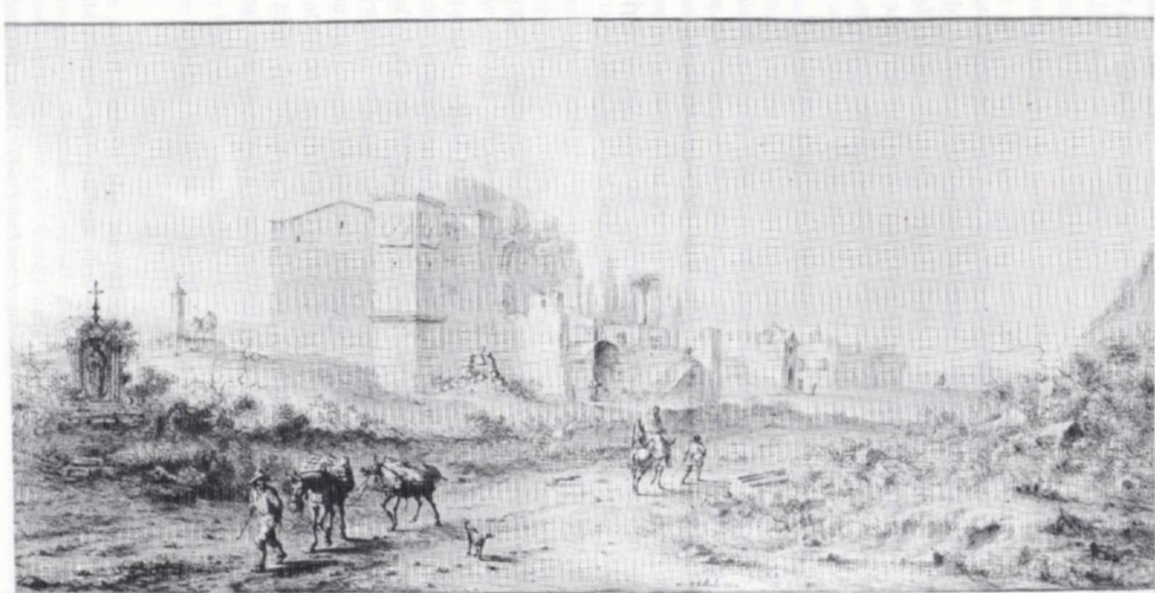


Figure 7: Schellinkx drawing of the Grotto

## **Appendix 2: Tour Itinerary**

### Overview

The guided tour will consist of a walking tour of Rabat which includes stops which are relevant to the themes of the long essay. Guests will be taken around a specific route where they will learn about the Pauline cult in Malta and how important the Grotto of St Paul became for the Order of St John and our nation, attracting several high-profile foreign visitors to the island. Numerous sites in the old town of Rabat will be used to recount a story of travellers in Early Modern times (c.1650-c.1750) making the journey to Rabat and the Grotto, illustrating their experience and the motivations why they undertook the journey.

### Saqqajja Fountain

The group assembles by the Saqqajja fountain, a suitable starting point because the spot is a landmark synonymous with Rabat. Additionally, the fountains were important watering spots for people who undertook the journey, but also for beasts of burden commonly used to transport people from the harbour area to this town.

### Viewpoint by Casino Notabile

This quieter spot will serve as a launching pad for the remainder of the tour, aided by a good view of the lower-lying East part of the island, including Valletta and the harbour area. Guests can obtain a good grasp of the distance visitors had to cover. Here, the guide will describe the practicalities of the journey, and introduce a central concept of the tour. Unlike what is commonly interpreted from the material about the Grotto, not all visitors were pilgrims, but rather different people had an entire spectrum of motivations to make the trip. Guests will be given examples of real devotional visitors, artists, and tourists with their specific motivations. The travel accounts of Athanasius Kircher, Jean Houel and Jacques Thierry are put forward to the guests.

### St Mark Church

In this stop, the guide will use the visuals of St Mark's church and the Augustinian convent to help illustrate the typical accommodation pilgrims who remained in Rabat could expect to have. Background information is given about St Mark the evangelist and St Paul the Apostle, how these two saints' lives briefly met in biblical times, and the schism between the two. This is useful for the guide to introduce and draw parallels to an important connection between the key figure of the hermit of St Paul's Grotto, Juan Benegas, and the Augustinians, which relations too were strained by different objectives. When the Augustinians asked Benegas to agree to provide them with shelter in the grotto and college in case of eviction from their current

property, the hermit only accepted with specific terms. Indeed, Benegas and the Order of St John guarded against any attempts by the Maltese ecclesiastical authorities to take back custody of the Pauline shrine. A description of the traditional blessing of the animals during the feast of St Anthony the Abbot will be used to highlight how revered and instrumental the beasts of burden were to locals and visitors alike.

#### St Bartholomew Chapel

This chapel is known as the only medieval chapel within Rabat which has not gone any significant alterations. The guide will make use of this backdrop to explain the rise in popularity of Christian pilgrimages in medieval times, illustrating the reasons why the faithful undertook such journeys and what they expected to receive. Jean Quintin d'Autun's report from 1533 is used to highlight how devout foreign visitors had been making the trip to the Grotto of St Paul in Rabat since medieval times, and how important the shrine had become.

#### Ta Doni Church

At this stop, the guide can entertain the group by emphasising how diverse the visitors who made the journey to Rabat could be. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century this church attracted the patronage of reformed prostitute Ursula Gatt, who overcame terrible circumstances and used her amassed wealth to help other contrite public women leave their profession, ask God for forgiveness, and embrace a life of prayer. Ursula Gatt and her maidens regularly made the pilgrimage from Valletta to this church, which includes an interesting collection of ex-votos, as these were donated by mostly women. Additionally, this stop provides an aesthetically pleasing visual of the recently restored Ta Doni church in the bustling St Paul's street.

#### Santo Spirito Hospital

The guide will explain that some scholars believe that this hospital, the earliest known on the island, was built precisely in this location to provide basic care and shelter to people making their way to the nearby Grotto. An explanation will follow of how the role of this hospital included taking care of foundlings, giving shelter to paupers, and administering medical care. The '*ruota*' mounted on the façade serves as a reminder of the Maltese society's onerous past. Thought-provoking anecdotes about the food served in the hospital, ranging from the modest and unappetising to generous meals on special occasions should be helpful for the guests to interpret this sight.

#### Niche of St Paul in Cosmana Navarra alley

At this stop, guests will see for the first time a typical representation of St Paul the Apostle, in the form of a colourfully painted statue mounted in a niche. Here the guide elaborates on how

travellers in Early Modern times would have seen such images in a myriad of pamphlets and publications the Order of St John distributed all over Europe, to attract more attention to the shrine and the island of the knights. By medieval times, the Pauline cult became a matter of identity to the Maltese. The ecclesiastical authorities leveraged the narrative of St Paul's shipwreck on the island of Malta to cement the nation's connection with the Christian faith. This was particularly important after the re-Christianisation of the island from 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

#### St Paul's Church Parvis Pillar

The conspicuous pillar includes marble tablets depicting the account of Paul's shipwreck from the Acts of the Apostles in multiple languages, in a prominent place on the St Paul's parish church parvis. This stop can be used by the guide to provide some insight into the biblical account of the shipwreck, crucial to the Maltese Pauline cult.

#### St Mary Magdalene Chapel

This underground chapel provides a suitable visual to highlight an important element of the Pauline cult and the earliest Christian places of worship found in Malta: cave churches. An account of how Basilian monks from Sicily brought Greek eremitic customs to Malta will be provided. Through their practices, these missionaries helped associate reclusive troglodytic settlements with places of worship, where some of the earliest Christian art in Malta can be found. The guide will provide insights into this phenomenon, shedding light on its possible allegorical meanings: caves could have been interpreted as tunnels through which man must pass after death for eternal life. Additionally, the subject of eremitic customs provides an opportunity to link back to one of the tour's protagonists, Juan Benegas.

#### Wignacourt painting in Wignacourt Museum foyer

Entering the museum, the guide will use the visual of Alof de Wignacourt's painting to narrate details of how important this Grandmaster was for the international fame of the Maltese Pauline cult. A brief account is given on how Wignacourt recognised the potential of the shrine, and waged a clever diplomatic exercise involving Benegas, the Church and Pope Paul V to enable the Order of St John to take custody of the Grotto and leverage its reputation for the benefit of the Order.

#### Grotto of St Paul

The last stop is where the tour culminates. Focusing on the cave itself, the guide will explain the legend of St Paul's three month stay in the Grotto in 60CE, and how it became known as

Malta's first church. Several ideas mentioned previously will be collated together in this special spot.

The three categories of visitors, devotional, artists and tourists will be used to give a narrative of how these individuals experienced the grotto differently, depending on their motivations for the journey. For example, pious travellers were struck by the dramatic baroque art and holy relics, both of which they believed brought them closer to the divine powers of the saint. Kircher's impressions are narrated here. Artists were more interested in studying the art for inspiration for their own work, or to be able to produce similar works to meet the demand. Jean Houel's opinion of Gafa's statue is used to provide flair to the story. Conversely tourists such as students of the educational 'grand tour' would pay a visit as part of a pre-set itinerary of places they had to include in their stops,

Different myths connected with the Grotto will be explained, including the beliefs surrounding its stone, and how this was cut, processed and sold all over Europe, and also widely-held but bizarre ideas of the cave retaining its physical dimensions no matter how much stone was quarried out.

The guide then proceeds to provide concluding remarks about the relevance of the shrine and faith-based tourism for Malta, giving recent examples of related initiatives being undertaken by specialised voluntary organisations supported by Heritage Malta and the Tourism Authority.