

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Equines on the Islands of Malta from the tenth to the twenty-first centuries AD**

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**Donkeys probably first arrived on Malta 3000 years ago. The first written record appears in the late tenth century when wild donkeys were present on an unoccupied Malta and were captured by itinerant traders for export, mainly to Sicily. In 1091 Sicily invaded Malta and confiscated all the inhabitants' horses and mules. Horse numbers declined from 600 animals in 1565 to 130 by 1638. Donkeys were always most numerous: 732 were exported between 1589 and 1611 along with 199 mules and 6 horses. Equines were pack and riding animals and worked in agriculture until horse-drawn carriages were introduced in the late eighteenth century: horse-drawn omnibuses arrived in the 1850s. Equines were phased out from traditional activities with the introduction of the internal combustion engine but donkeys had a continued urban presence until the mid-twentieth century working for peripatetic traders. Horse transport resurged briefly during World War II when vehicle fuel was scarce. Between 1961 and 1984 donkey numbers declined from 2383 animals to 500, mules regressed from 1599 to 300 and horse numbers fell from 1906 to 890. No reliable population data are available since the mid-1980s. In the 2020s horse numbers have built up for sport (dressage, show jumping, racing and polo), leisure and tourism but donkeys and mules are no longer important.**

**Key words:** Foreign invasions, beasts of burden, agricultural operations, horse-drawn vehicles, trade, equine sports.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Republic of Malta is an archipelago in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean Sea, lying 50 miles (80 km) south of Sicily (Italy), 176 miles (284 km) east of Tunisia and 207 miles (333 km) north of Libya. The archipelago comprises three inhabited islands (Malta, Gozo and Comino) and 18 uninhabited islets (CIA, 2023). Malta, with limited exceptions, has been inhabited for about 7000 years. Due to its strategic location in the Mediterranean it has been subject to several invasions and occupations by various cultures. The Phoenicians colonised the islands almost three thousand years ago

(800-700 BC) and used them to extend their trading activities throughout the Mediterranean area, North Africa and southwestern Europe. The Carthaginians from their base in Tunisia then occupied Malta for some time until they were ousted in 218 BC by the Roman Republic (History Extra, 2023).

The Romans in turn were expelled by the Byzantine Empire in the fourth century AD which retained possession of the archipelago until the ninth century. An invasion by Arabs who introduced Islam took place in 870 AD. Muslim rule came to an end when the Normans

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conquered the island in 1091 and the islands were completely re-Christianised by 1249.

The islands were part of the Kingdom of Sicily until 1530 when Charles V of Spain gave them in perpetual lease to the Order of Knights of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem (Luttrell, 1975). Napoleon invaded the islands in 1798 but his hegemony was very brief. In 1800 the Maltese recovered the islands with the aid of the British (History Extra, 2023). In what was a most extraordinary event in the history of the British Empire, which was largely expanded through conquest, in 1802 the Maltese, requested Britain to assume sovereignty over the islands which declared it a British Colony in 1814. A proposal in 1956 to integrate Malta into the United Kingdom did not come to pass as the British people were reluctant for this to happen. Malta became an independent country in 1964 but retained the British Sovereign as its Head of State until 1974 when it became a Republic. The Republic joined the European Union in 2004 (Rudolf and Berg, 2010). This paper reviews the history of equines on the archipelago over a period of more than one thousand years from the tenth to the twenty-first centuries. As far as can be ascertained it is the first synthesis of the presence and activities of donkeys, mules and horses on the islands of Malta to be published in both the national and international scientific literature. It thus broadens and provides a more comprehensive view of the activities of equines over a long period and how external factors have influenced the social and economic roles of this group of domestic animals.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is based in part on a visit to Malta in April and May 2023. During this period, informal and unstructured verbal discussions were undertaken with various interested parties, including administrators and officials of the various equine sports associations, the owners and operators of the tourist carriages known as *karozzin* and the Agriculture Centre and Innovation Hub of the Maltese government were made.

The main sources of information, however, were from a thorough internet search and literature review relating to equines in the archipelago. Terms included in the search (no restrictions or limits) the internet search, all preceded by Malta or Maltese were: Geography, history, equines, horses, mules, donkeys, asses and equine sports. No recent international sources or publications on Maltese equines were found during the internet search.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Do not call your brother an ass, for you are his next of kin (Maltese proverb)

### Tenth to fifteenth centuries

The date on which equines first arrived in Malta is not known with any certainty. One authority believes,

however, that it was at the time of the Phoenicians some 3000 years ago as they expanded and consolidated their empire (Dent, 1972:152-153). It was nonetheless sure to have been a considerable time before the end of the first millennium AD. Testament to this is by Ibn Hauqa, the Arab Muslim writer, geographer and chronicler. He travelled around the Mediterranean towards the end of the tenth century and records that Malta was uninhabited at the time but was occasionally visited by people who rounded up wild donkeys there. These were then shipped to mainland Europe, mainly Sicily where they were sold and put to work on a variety of tasks (Gabrieli, 1961).<sup>1</sup>

The islands were gradually repopulated from Sicily during the eleventh century. In 1091 the Norman Count Roger of Sicily invaded and conquered the islands. In one battle, the Count with as few as thirteen knights on horseback massacred many of the resident population, the remainder being forced to surrender all their horses and mules to him together with all their weapons (Luttrell, 1975).

In the fourteenth century, blocks of land known as fiefs were granted to individuals on condition of military service by one or more armed men on horseback in the king's military forces (Wettinger, 1982). At the beginning of the fifteenth century, horses were relatively scarce in agriculture as oxen were preferred

### Sixteenth to eighteenth centuries

The Maltese islands have for long been dependent on imports of food from abroad which necessarily arrived by sea. Travel to gain access to and supply the interior, other than by foot, was by mule or donkey. As a result, a trade centred on buying and selling these kinds of stock developed, not only for internal trade for use in Malta but also for export to Sicily and elsewhere overseas (Cassar, 1996).

In the late fifteenth century, persons arriving at Malta by sea were able to hire donkeys for the journey from the coast to the then capital of Mdina, some eight miles (12.9 km) inland (Cassar, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Even so travel was very difficult in winter: in 1575, for example, the parish priest of Rabat was unable to travel to outlying villages at times in order to administer extreme unction to his parishioners. A small force of horse cavalry was maintained in Malta but other than that horses were very scarce in the country. So rare, in fact that the Grand Master of the Knights ordered his representative in Palermo to obtain stallions

<sup>1</sup> In the Maltese language, which is largely derived from the western Arabic spoken in Sicily and Spain in the Middle Ages, donkey is *hmar*, mule is *baghal* and horse is *ziemel*. *Humr* (حمار) is the modern Arabic word for donkey and an Arabic base can be recognized in many Maltese words in agricultural terms and in many other areas when travelling around the island.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the immediately following text is based on Cassar as much of his text is derived from obscure manuscript and archival sources which were not available to the Author of this paper.

**Table 1.** Equine exports from Malta at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

Period	Species				Total
	Donkey	Mule	Horse	Unspecified	
1589-1595	28	18	0	0	46
1596-1600	302	772	3	0	382
1601-1605	121	35	1	0	157
1605-1611	281	69	2	20	372
Total	732	199	6	20	957
Percentage/a	76.5	20.8	0.6	2.1	100

A - Percentage of species of total exports.

Source: Cassar, 1996 (from his source: MCC Reg. Patentarum II-IV: 1581-1611).

in Sicily and ship them to Malta.

The horse shortage persisted for a considerable time with the complement of 600 horses in the country in 1565 being reduced to 130 by 1638, compelling the Grand Master issuing an Edict forbidding the export of horses without a licence. During this period, mules continued to be in considerable demand due to their load carrying capacity and sturdy nature and they were used to transport artillery by the Ottoman army in its attempt to conquer Malta during the great siege of 1565 (Cassola, 1999).

Exports of equines, particularly donkeys, were clearly a profitable business. Between 1589 and 1611, a total of 957 beasts of burden were exported on 146 voyages by vessels which departed from Malta (Table 1) with variations in numbers in individual years. The destination of most of these animals was usually Sicily or other Italian ports although at least one animal went to Marseilles. Donkeys were in great demand in Sicily where they were very cheap to buy and very cheap to keep: in 1565, for example, a donkey was valued at 15 scudi whereas a pregnant (horse) mare was worth 50 scudi.

As early as the seventeenth century (but possibly as early as the fourteenth century) bareback horse and donkey races were held at a major festival known as "mnarja" near Mdina to celebrate the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (Pullicino, 1949). The prizes for the winners of these races are "palji" (special brocaded banners) which the winners traditionally donate to their village church to be used as an altar cloth. The festival continues to the present and the feast day of 29 June is a public holiday in Malta.

The Maltese donkey is not recorded as a breed in the authoritative dictionary of Mason (1996). The same source, however, somewhat strangely in view of its absence from the main listing, notes it as a contributor to the gene pool of the American Mammoth Jackstock. This well-known and magnificent breed has its origins in two jack (male) donkeys imported from Europe. In 1785, George Washington, first President of the United States

of America, decided his country needed better mules (Howard, 2016). He petitioned King Charles IV of Spain for some of his large Spanish donkeys. The outcome was the arrival of a jack known as Royal Gift that stood 16 hands (162 cm) at the withers. In 1786, the Marquis de Lafayette, a French aristocrat who had fought with Washington in the American War of Independence sent him a Maltese Jack standing at 14 hands (142 cm) known as the Knight of Malta.

From these two imports, both of which Washington hired out at stud (Figure 1), he bred a strain of donkeys that became the "Compound" whose mules were stronger, hardier and cost three times as much as a working horse (Howard, 2016). Further jacks were imported from Malta over the years and were used to breed riding and carriage mules whereas Spanish jacks were used to get heavy draught mules (Dent, 1972:108). GWP Custis, the great-step-grandson of Washington and a plantation owner in the state of Virginia, wrote:

*The Knight was of mediocre size, clean limbed, great activity, the fire and ferocity of a tiger, a dark brown, nearly a black colour, white belly and muzzle, could be managed only by one groom and that always at considerable risk. His mules were all active, spirited and serviceable, and from stout mares attained considerable size (Dent, 1972: 108).*

### Nineteenth century

Ridden mules, donkeys, and to a lesser extent, horses were the main means of transport until the end of the eighteenth century. As that period ended, when the Knights of St John controlled the islands, a few wheeled vehicles, mainly farm carts (Maltese = il-karettun), were used as people transport, but the caleche (Maltese = il-kaless) had appeared by the middle of the eighteenth century (Chetcuti, 2018)<sup>3</sup>. Some 1200 carts and 900 caleches were registered by 1830 (Miège, 1841). The caleche became popular in Valletta and the urban areas

**ROYAL GIFT, AND THE KNIGHT OF MALTA, two valuable JACK ASSES,**

**W**ILL cover Mares and Jennies at MOUNT-VERNON, this Spring, for Five Guineas the Season.

The first, is of the most valuable Race in the Kingdom of Spain.—The other, lately imported from Malta, by the Way of Paris, is not inferior.—ROYAL GIFT, (now 5 Years old) has increased remarkably in Size since he covered last Year—and not a Jenney, and scarcely a Mare to which he went, miss d.—THE KNIGHT OF MALTA will be 3 Years old this Spring—is near 14 Hands high—most beautifully formed for an Ass—and extremely light, active and sprightly.—Comparatively speaking, he resembles a fine Courser.

These two JACKS seem as if designed for different Purposes equally valuable.—The first, by his Weight and great Strength, to get Mules for the slow and heavy Draught.—The other, by his Activity and Sprightliness, for quicker Movements on the Road.—The Value of Mules, on account of their Longevity, Strength, Hardiness and cheap keeping, is too well known to need Description.

**M A G N O L I O**

Stands at the same Place, for FOUR POUNDS the Season.—The Money, in every Case, is to be paid at the Stable, before the Mares or Jennies are taken away.—No Accounts will be kept.—Good Pasture, well enclosed, will be provided, at Half a Dollar per Week, for the Convenience of those who incline to leave their Mares, and every reasonable Care will be taken of them; but they will not be insured against Theft or Accidents.

**JOHN FAIRFAX, OVERSEER.**

*Mount-Vernon, March 12, 1787.*

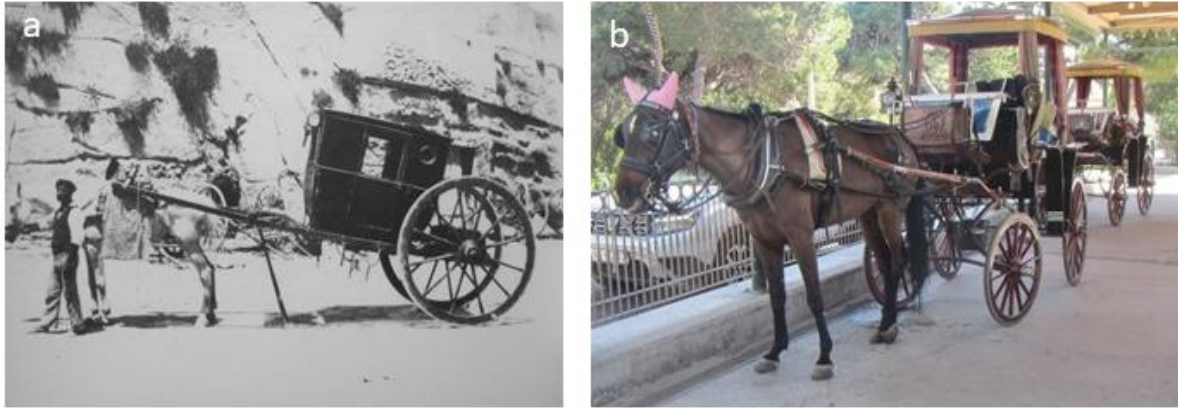
Figure 1. Notice for the services of George Washington's donkey jack.  
Source: <https://americanmuleassociation.org/say-anything/the-royal-jack-and->

around the Grand Harbour. It comprised a rough cabin slung between a pair of shafts on leather straps. Unlike most 2-wheeled vehicles in which the passenger compartment sits over the axle, in the caleche, it was located before the axle. All the weight of the contraption and its passenger(s) was thus borne by the horse or mule. The large-diameter wheels were of hard wooden spokes covered by a thick iron tire. Drawn by a single animal, the caleche was directed by a man walking at the side of the vehicle (Figure 2a). Some vehicles carried lamps, which allowed their use at night. The cabin was usually painted black or dark green and was sometimes adorned with the coat of arms of the owner. The interior might be upholstered with very fine fabric or damask, and curtains offered not only privacy but also protection from the elements<sup>4</sup>.

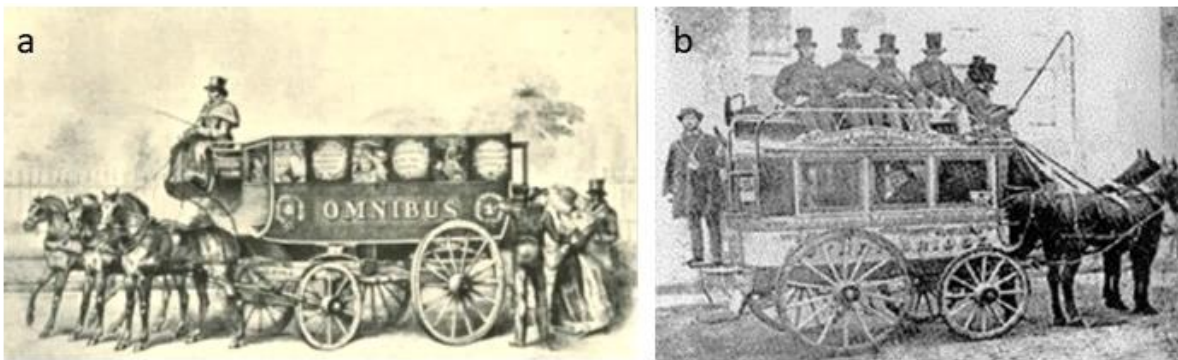
As there was little or no suspension, a caleche ride was very rough. Seasoned military campaigners also found it so, as epitomized by a veteran of the Napoleonic wars in Egypt: Caleches were "very clumsy awkward carriages... which shake the unfortunate passengers to pieces" (Walsh, 1803). Even the caleche, however, was unable to travel to some places over the very bad tracks (Swan, 1826:86). As early as 1820, a British writer wrote travellers' guides: The ninth edition of her guide provided

information on Maltese transport. She stated 2-wheel carriages in general use, drawn by one horse, could be hired by the day at 3 shillings 6 pence or by the half-day at 2 shillings; the few 4-wheeled carriages with two horses cost 7 shillings for the day or 4 shillings 2 pence for the half-day, and horses could be hired for 3 shillings and 2 shillings for the day and half-day (Starke, 1836:469). In late 1836, a gentleman meandering around the Mediterranean and southeastern Europe traveled by caleche in Malta, describing it as "a covered vehicle drawn by one horse or mule with a very high straddle, the driver walks by the side or occasionally sits on the shaft" (Burton, 1838:15).

If the caleche was uncomfortable, better was to come. The 4-wheel enclosed carriage known as a karozzin (Maltese = karozzin) was introduced to Malta in 1856. A comfortable ride for four passengers; it was also better for the driver who oversaw the one or two horses, sitting on a bench at the front of the passenger compartment. The karozzin quickly became a popular means of transport both for intraurban and longer journeys to the outlying villages. It was a particularly sought-after vehicle for family outings and for church trips on Sunday. The karozzin gradually lost its importance, perhaps in part with the advent of horse-drawn omnibuses. In the 2020s,



**Figure 2a.** - a Caleche (kaless) in Malta 1856. **b** - a Karozzin awaiting custom at Mdina in April 2023. Source: Photo by Lea Francis Ellis on flickr <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/784118985135339389/>; Photo by the Author, 28 April 2023).



**Figure 3a.** - a 16-seat omnibus of the first batch to arrive in 1856 (note 3-horse harnessing); **b** - a 27-seater of the second batch.

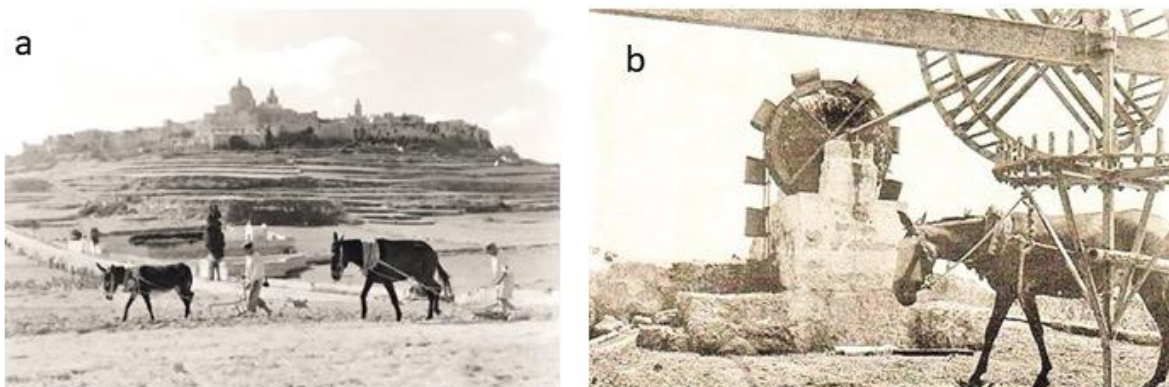
Source: <https://ohmymalta.com.mt/2020/06/26/the-evolution-of-transport-in-malta/>; <https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/maltese-public-transport-since-1856-a-brief-history-of-the-public-transport-in-malta-the-omnibus-up-to-the-mid-1800s-the-only-means-of-human-transport-w/>.

the carriage is seen in Valletta and Mdina where it serves the tourist industry with short (and expensive!) turns around the popular sites (Figure 2b). Other types of horse-drawn vehicles were also used in small numbers. The landau was more elongated than the normal carriage and had closed doors and windows: This vehicle was used by the island's bishop and by His Royal Highness the Duke of York (later King George V of Great Britain and incidentally the King of the Crown Colony of Malta) in 1901 (Duncan, 2019). Two other types of carriage were the wagonette said to be a roofless carriage and the 4-wheel phaeton with open seating on a long bench (Duncan, 2019).

People transport became easier in 1856 with the introduction of horse-drawn omnibuses. In October, the first 16-seater bus (Figure 3a) arrived in Malta from England. About the same time, six buses were bought, each with a capacity of 27 persons (Figure 3b), along

with horses to draw these. On 2 November, ten horses arrived by ship. The first two buses arrived on 4 January 1857, followed by two more on 11 January when operations were started on a route from Valletta to Lija, followed by the route Valletta to Saint Julian on 19 January. The horse buses operated successfully for several years but became the subject of competition when the railway from Valletta to Mdina started operations in 1883.

More competition arrived in 1905 with the advent of an electric tram service. Shortly afterwards, all these modes of transport were ousted by the introduction of buses operating with internal combustion engines. Throughout the nineteenth century (and into the early twentieth), the less noble equines that were the mule and the ass gave sterling service to agriculture in ploughing the arable lands (Figure 4a), in lifting water from underground sources to the surface to be used in irrigation (Figure 4b),



**Figure 4.** Equines in the service of man in the mid nineteenth century: a - donkey and mule with wooden ploughs below the city of Mdina; b - mule operating a mill (“sienja”) to lift groundwater for surface irrigation.  
Source: <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/an-1841-account-of-agricultural-activity-in-malta-by-dominique-miege>.

and in many other ways on the land and in drawing carts laden with the fruits of that land. A “Cavalry Section” was formed in the Malta police force in 1860 (Vassallo, 2018). It was, however, the presence of the British Army and the Royal Navy in the United Kingdom’s colony of Malta that was a boon for horses. Many officers of these armed forces were of the higher echelons of society, and they brought higher-class horses as individuals for their leisure and pleasure times.

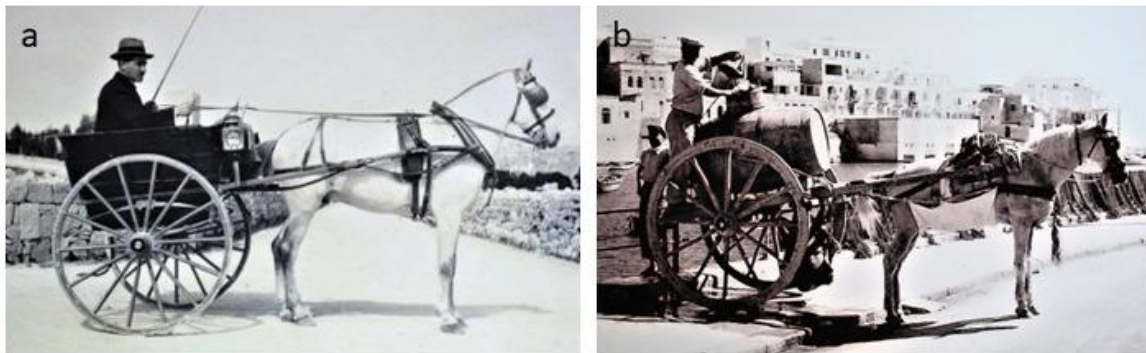
Officers of the Armed Forces were often competitive, and soon their minds and deeds turned to competitive sport. In 1868, a few keen enthusiasts, including not only Army and Navy officers but also some local sportsmen, decided to found a racing association. A Malta Race Committee was founded, and the Marsa area was selected as the site for the racetrack, which quickly became, at one and three-quarter miles (2800 m), the longest in Europe. Funds were initially difficult, and members had to rely mainly on their personal assets. The first meeting of seven events, including the “Malta Grand National Steeplechase” of two miles (3200 m), was open to English, Arab, Barb, and Spanish horses and took place on 12 to 13 April, 1869. Whereas one of the first races was a steeplechase (that is, a track with fences and other obstacles that have to be jumped over), most races were flat races (no obstacles) in which, until at least the outbreak of World War One, the jockeys were also the owners of the horses (Vassallo History, 2023). Claimed to be the second oldest club in the world behind the Calcutta Polo Club of India and the oldest in Europe, the Malta Polo Club was founded in 1868 by British Army and Royal Navy officers stationed on the island and by others who were either on their way to or returning home from India. The Cavalry regiments and the Royal Navy’s Mediterranean fleet were the first teams to play on the island. The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, a former president of the Club, introduced Maltese players to the game and personally taught many who were interested in this novel sport (Anon, 2023).

### Twentieth century

The Royal Navy Polo Association (RNPA) was founded in Malta in 1929 by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes, commanding the Royal Navy Mediterranean Fleet. Before then, however, the Cawnpore Cup was initiated in India in 1901 and transferred to Malta in 1947 when India became independent. When the Royal Navy withdrew from Malta in the 1960s, the RNPA and its ponies returned to the UK but the Cawnpore Cup is still contested at the Malta Polo Club (Anon, 2017). The Rundle Cup, named after the Colonial Governor of the time, was first competed for in 1915 when it was won by the Royal Navy team and last contested in Malta in 1966 when it was won by the Army: It is still contested in England on an annual basis.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1930s (and probably before), the Royal Navy put out contracts for transporting supplies and material among RN establishments on Malta, mostly from the Dockyard to other locations (Anon, 2011). A contractor was to supply horses or mules (note no donkeys), harness, carts, drivers and laborers as demanded by the superintending officer. Animals were to be strong, full-sized, well-made, not old or battered, sound, well-fleshed, in good condition, free from sores, and in all respects fit for the services to be supplied. The contractor had to provide and keep repaired all harnesses, collars, and cart saddles. Horses or mules were to work singly or in teams of up to four. Horses were to be properly shod, fed and watered regularly at the contractor’s expense. Time was not to be spent in shoeing, feeding, cleaning, harnessing or watering the horses or mules during working hours other than in case of unavoidable accident or necessity, but the Admiralty would not, in any case, be responsible for accidents. The animals’ feet were to be examined,

<sup>3</sup>General Sir Henry Macleod Leslie Rundle, GCB, GCMG, GCVO, DSO (6 January 1856-19 November 1934) was Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Malta from 1909 to 1915



**Figure 5.** Equine roles in the 1930s: a - a “pleasure cart” [the vehicle is closer to a phaeton than the one described earlier and note also the quality of the horse] than the one described; b - Water being loaded on to a cart to slake dust on unpaved roads prior to World War Two. Source: [https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=horse+drawn+leisure+cart+in+malta+in+1930s#imgrc=Wu\\_rq93vbK1BCM,https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/chairs-carts-non-mechanised-transport-old-malta](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=horse+drawn+leisure+cart+in+malta+in+1930s#imgrc=Wu_rq93vbK1BCM,https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/chairs-carts-non-mechanised-transport-old-malta).

and their shoes repaired at the expense of the contractor during the workmen’s meal break and at the end of the working day. Carts were to be 2-wheeled, strong and well-made and fitted with strong boxes with distinctive markings to the satisfaction of the superintending officer. The standard load was 20 cubic feet (0.57 cubic meters), equal to a weight of between 12 and 15 cwt (609 to 762 kg), with the latter weight being the maximum load for a single horse or mule. Although there was plenty of work during peacetime, equine transport came into its own during the 1437 enemy air raids that blitzed Malta between June 1940 and November 1942 when petrol and spare parts for lorries were in short supply. During air raids, all horses and mules were unharnessed and tethered, but still, many animals were killed (Anon, 2011).

During the first half of the twentieth century the motor bus took over the role of public transport as it displaced the horse. A few horses were still used by some Maltese with adequate disposable income to provide leisure activities (Figure 5a), and horsepower was again used during World War Two when petrol, even for the armed forces, was restricted by enemy action. Throughout this early period, mules and donkeys continued to provide much of the energy for the agricultural sector and were employed in a range of roles in other sectors, being used extensively, for example, in carts that spread water on still unpaved roads to slake the dust (Figure 5b) (Bonelli, 2022). A feature particularly in urban areas well into the 1940s was the use by entrepreneurs or small businesses of donkeys, mules, and horses in carts or as pack animals to provide a wide range of goods and services to the local people (Figure 6). Good quality horses were imported from North Africa, and trotting horses were introduced in the late 1920s. A challenge cup, the “It-Tazza l-Kbira” (The Big Cup) was established by the Malta Racing Club in 1934. The increase in the British military during the 1930s led to increased use of horses for leisure and sport, but this came to an end during the

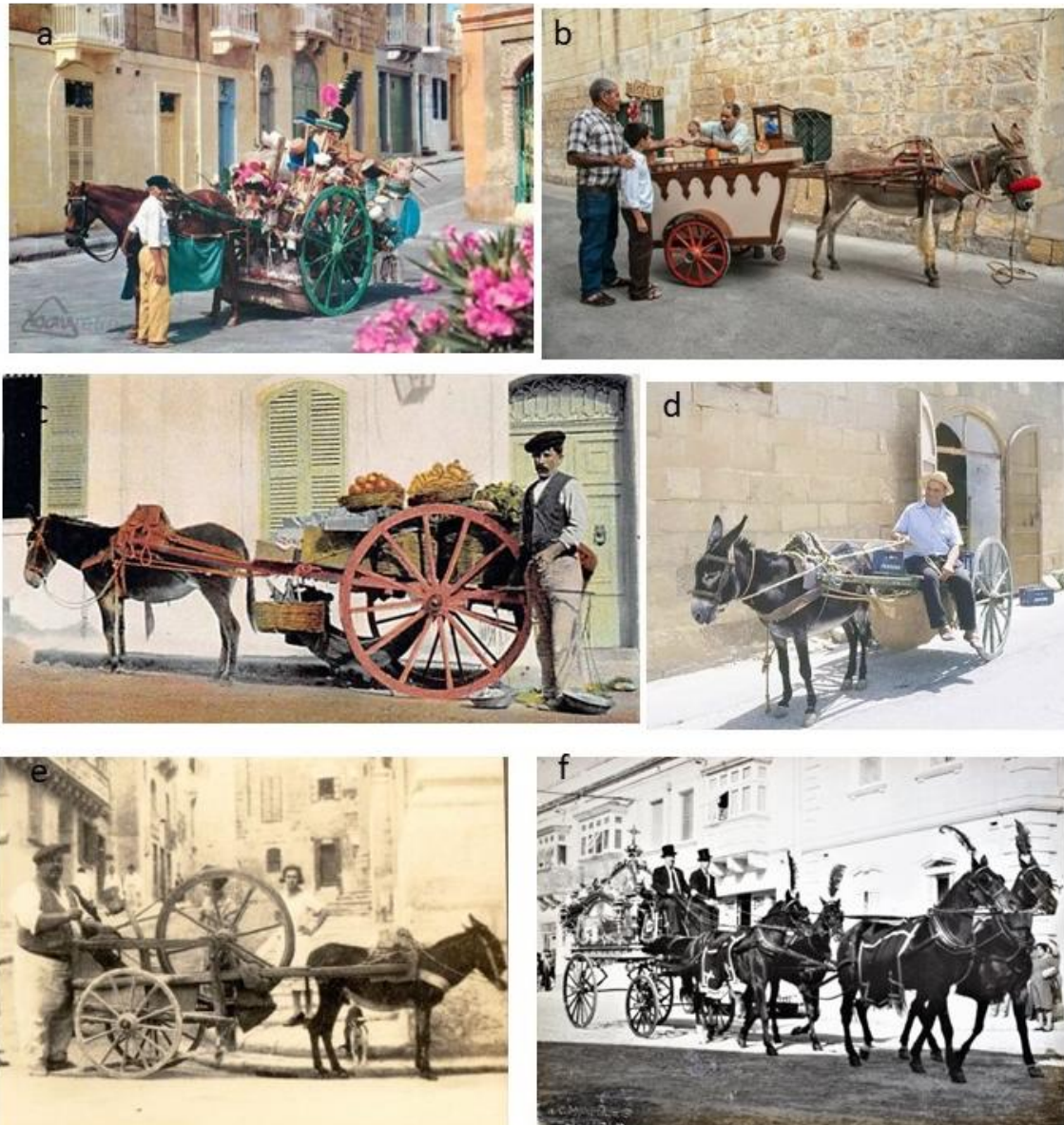
Second World War. Sporting activities resumed in 1945 with the availability of Trotters and new inflows of European (mainly British) Thoroughbreds enabled flat racing to restart. Photo-finishing equipment was installed at Marsa race course in 1983, and starting gates appeared in 1985. There was a steady decline in the numbers of all three types of equines between 1961 and the mid-1980s (FAOStat, 2023). The number of donkeys fell from 2383 in the former year to 500 in the latter period. Mules lost 1300 head from 1599 animals in 1961 to 300 in 1984. Horse numbers were reduced from 1906 to 890 in the same period (Figure 7).<sup>4</sup> Concomitant to the decline in numbers coupled with more intensive use of arable land was a decline in the quality of native Maltese animals. By the 1970s, donkey breeding was reduced to a minor activity and animals were imported mainly from North Africa (Dent, 1972:153).

### Twenty-first century

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the traditional roles of equines as working animals in the fields to provide energy and on the roads as a transport animal for people and goods had been superseded by the internal combustion engine. The only “work” animal in 2023 appears to be the one used in the karozzin trade. Licences are needed for horses and operators as well as the vehicle and are limited to 111 vehicles at any one time. Donkey and mule numbers were at a historical low, and these two classes of stock had virtually disappeared from the islands.

Not so for horses, however, which had become very popular in sport and other leisure pursuits. Equestrian

<sup>4</sup>These numbers are from FAO who credit, in various years, any of official data, estimates and imputed numbers: data from the mid 1980s to 2017 on the FAO data base remain static (claimed as estimates).



**Figure 6.** Equines providing the urban areas with goods and services: a - horse cart with household essentials; b - donkey cart dispensing ice cream; c - donkey cart with mixed vegetables; d - donkey cart with mixed goods on the island of Gozo; e - a peripatetic knife sharpener in the streets of Valletta; f - memento mori = the final journey.

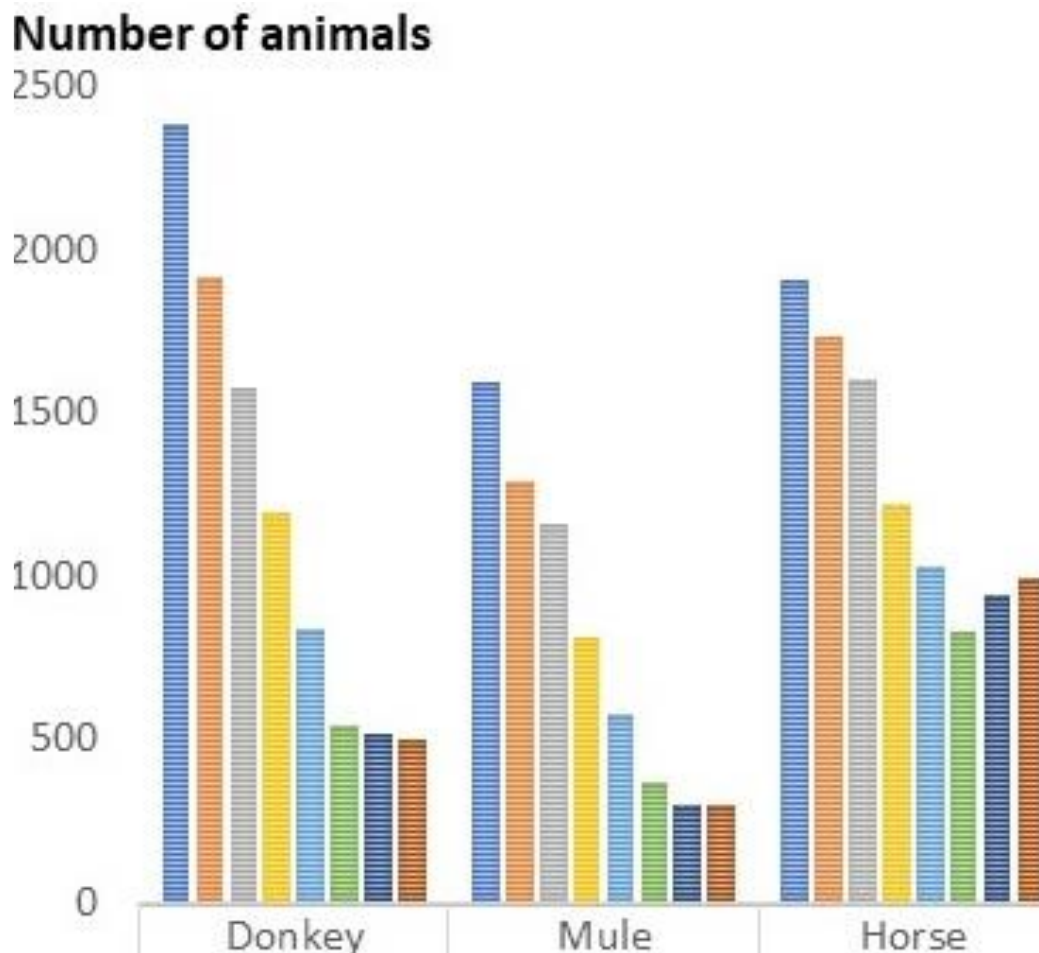
Source: <https://www.mediastorehouse.com/eyeubiquitous/transport/20033293-20105689.html>;  
<https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/street-vendors/>;  
<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/26/b8/70/26b8701897a48031fff994c2af2e17e8.jpg>;  
<https://www.mediastorehouse.com/eyeubiquitous/transport/20033293-20105689.htm>;  
<https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/390476230193363873/>;

events were introduced in the 1970s under the auspices of La Valette Riding Club, which was affiliated with the British Horse Society (BHS). Olympic sports, including dressage (Figure 8a), show jumping (Figure 8b), and cross-country competitions, were held regularly, in addition to fun events such as gymkhana games, fancy dress rides, handy hunters, and the like. The club had a

riding membership of over one hundred, with most events centered on the facilities in Marsa (Pisani, 2006).

The Malta Equestrian Federation (MEF) (Figure 8c) was established in 1999 to govern the growing sport and became affiliated with the international governing body, the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI). A new equestrian center was opened in 2012, the larger





**Figure 7.** Changes in numbers of equines by 4-year periods, 1961-1993.  
Source: Adapted from FAOStat (2023).

facilities allowing the sport to grow between 2013 and 2016, with monthly shows attracting more than 100 entries. The MEF joined the international leagues in the World Dressage Championships in 2010, a competition organized by the FEI for federations in small countries in which judges traveled to the riders as opposed to the usual format where riders had to travel to a competition. Malta was placed in Zone 4 composed of Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. Local riders enjoyed some success and were placed second in the team competition in 2010 and 2015 (Pisani, 2006). The MEF hosts competitions, adhering to the FEI codes of conduct with regard to horse welfare, the environment, and fair play throughout the year with the season culminating in the Championship Cup at the end of May or early June.

Horse racing is still important to Maltese culture, with up to 40 meetings per year between January and July on the main island under the auspices of the Malta Racing Club (Figure 8d) at its Marsa racetrack (now rebranded the Malta Equidrome). The major draw is still trotting

(Figure 8e), usually over 2640 m (1.64 miles or about 1 mile 5 furlongs in English racing terms). Every year the “It-Tazza l-Kbira” attracts international competitors. In 2014, for example, on the 80th anniversary of its establishment, there were entrants from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA in addition to those from Malta.

Flat races, in which a jockey rides on a saddle on the horse’s back, are less popular than harness racing and are run over a maximum distance of 2250 m (1.40 miles, 1 mile 3 furlongs 40 yards). Racing is not confined however to the main island. The Gozo Horse Racing Association has its headquarters at the Xhajma Racetrack where there are meetings every two weeks from October to May and occasionally at other times of the year. There are also traditional racing events on Gozo, such as on the 15th of August on the feast of Santa Matija along the streets of the city of Victoria, the largest town on Gozo (Anon, 2022).

The Malta Polo Club shares grounds and facilities at Marsa with the Malta Race Club (Figure 8g). The Polo



**Figure 8.** Activities with horses in the twenty-first century: a - dressage under FEI rules; b - show jumping under FEI rules c - logo of the Malta Equestrian Federation; d - logo of the Malta Racing Club; e - trotting races are held regularly at the Malta Racing Club's Marsa race track; f - street racing at the Feast of Santa Marija in Victoria, Gozo; g - polo is a popular sport for both men and women; h - polo in the heat of the action.

Source: <https://www.maltaequestrianfederation.org/>; <https://www.maltaequestrianfederation.org/news-1/>; [https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-e-d&q=malta+racing+club+logo#vhid=sbxSsP4bo7i\\_rM&vssid=l](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-e-d&q=malta+racing+club+logo#vhid=sbxSsP4bo7i_rM&vssid=l;); <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/wins-cupidon-du-corbon-surf-n-turf.1011849>; <https://gozo.news/98857/santa-marija-feast-celebrations-in-victoria-this-weekend/>; <https://maltapoloclub.com/the-equestrialmalta-cawnpore-cup/>; <https://maltapoloclub.com/history/>.

Club provides entertainment for competitors and spectators alike at its regular meetings (Figure 8h). It has stabling for 60 ponies and rents out ponies for beginners and adepts, whatever their level of competence. A professionally staffed academy helps newcomers to the sport improve their skills. The Club is a Corresponding

Member of the Federation of International Polo (FIP) and is placed in Zone C (Europe): Corresponding Members of the FIP provide membership information but do not pay the full membership fee and do not participate in or benefit from any FIP programs or events.

Testament to the continued and increasing popularity of



**Figure 9.** The Malta Police Mounted Section: a - stables at Marsa (Source: <https://tvmnews.mt/en/news/new-horses-for-police-forces-cavalry-division/>); guardians of the peace. Source: <http://merlinandrebecca.blogspot.com/2012/03/maltese-horses.html>.

the sport is the Island Polo Club, which was established in January 2015 and is based at the MonteKristro Estate in the south of the main island. The club has chukkas four times a week between the beginning of October and the end of June. It provides instruction and other activities for new entrants to the sport. It has both male and female players. Livery services are provided for those with their own ponies, and the Club also has ponies for hire.

The “Cavalry Section” of the Police Force referred to earlier is officially known as the Mounted Section of the Traffic Branch and has stables at Marsa (Figure 9a). The Section comprises 21 horses and 15 officers. Fifteen new horses were purchased in 1918 to improve the quality of horseflesh (Vassallo, 2018). Half- or three-quarter bred animals are preferred by the police force as they combine the spirit of a thoroughbred with the strength and stability of a draught horse. Training in police work is tailored to each horse and usually lasts six months, preferably carried out with the officer who “owns” the horse. On completion of its training, horses are given the rank of Inspector (trained dogs are only Sergeants!). A normal shift for man and beast lasts eight hours, beginning with the care of tack and the horse. Patrols are designed to deter criminals and reassure the public of police presence, aided by the high visibility of the horse and rider (Figure 9b). Crowd control and escort duties for foreign diplomats and displays, especially during the annual celebrations of the Police Anniversary in July, are also among the functions of the Mounted Section (Anon, 2010).

Horse-drawn hearses were reintroduced to the Maltese streets in 2009. They had not been seen since 1970 but a local undertaker has repaired and revived five 120-year-old vehicles: The Priests carriage, first-class carriage (talkewba) originally used by “rich Sliema residents”; prima and sekonda carriages used by lower levels of society but equally elaborate; and a white hearse for babies and

single women (Debono, 2009). A rapidly expanding subsector of the horse scene is the proliferation of riding schools, one of which also has a donkey and the beginning at some of these schools of hippotherapy.<sup>5</sup>

In many countries that practice equine sports, there is a welfare lobby that accuses the industry of not caring for the welfare of its horses and even accuses them of cruelty. Malta is no exception to this generalization. Recently, the country’s Animal Welfare Commissioner reminded owners that a horse was for life and not just for a short period of racing before being “dumped” (Calleja, 2019). The single very active horse welfare non-governmental organization (NGO) in Malta, founded in 2016, indicates that up to 300 horses per year are imported into the country and that most of these are sport horses (RMJ, 2023). It contends that the majority of these do not race or play a game for a whole season, that some do not race or play even once, and that in any case, they are neglected at the end of their careers or sent for slaughter. The owners of course deny this and say they continue to look after their charges.<sup>6</sup> The NGO is a totally voluntary organization, receives no funding from any official source and relies entirely on donations from the private sector to house and feed the up to 80 horses in its care and to attempt to find new homes for the abandoned animals.

Horse numbers have increased during the twenty-first century. Reliable information on numbers is not readily accessible, and that which is available is often

<sup>5</sup>Access through Google.

<sup>6</sup>On the day this section was written a regional newspaper in the west of England reported that British Racing’s Horse Welfare Board was launching a census of the fate of thoroughbred horses at the end of their racing careers and would enable the board to “improve the traceability of thoroughbreds after they retire from racing [...] help to talk about responsible ownership and the critical part every thoroughbred owner plays in the post career of retired horses!” (Western Morning News 12 July 2023, pp. 16-17).

contradictory and contestable. The 300 head of imports noted in the preceding paragraph gives no indication of the purpose, whether they are temporary entrants for sports events or permanent imports for leisure. Information on exports is unreliable and probably inaccurate. FAO data for 1961-2023 are a case in point and again cite a variety of sources for numbers. In the period 1965 to 2008, annual imports according to FAO but based on official data varied from 80 to 812 horses per year, with most years in the range of 300-500 (FAO, 2003). From 2009 to 2019, the number of imports varied from 0 to 3, with outliers of 7 (2011), 18 (2012), and 19 (2009).

Over the same time frame of 1961 to 2023, exports of horses varied in the range of 0 to 8, with outliers of 62 (2013), 39 (2003), 18 (2002), 17 (1972) and 107 (1966 - note this is the year the British military left Malta). In the official Census of Agriculture 2020, Question E9 in the Livestock Section asks, "How many Equidae were being reared for consumption or as a means of production in agriculture (exclude racing and riding horses) on 30-09-2020?" but the summary of livestock numbers by species has no listing for Equidae (NSO, 2022). As a Member State of the European Union, all domestic animals in Malta must be registered and capable of being individually identified. On the premise that Malta adheres to these regulations, the most recent and almost certainly the most accurate information concerning horse numbers in Malta is that provided from the National Livestock Database by the Directorate for Veterinary Regulation: In August 2021 there were 5506 horses in the Republic (Micallaf, 2021).

Horses slaughtered legally in abattoirs are in the region of 12 per year but horse meat on the market is in excess of which would be available from local slaughter (Martin, 2019). Horse meat is, however, legally imported into Malta: In 2021 the value of such imports was 192 thousand US Dollars coming mainly from Belgium (127 thousand dollars), Brazil (107 thousand dollars), Italy (56.8 thousand dollars) and the Netherlands (7.84 thousand dollars) (OEC, 2023). Other sources believe that illegal horse meat is also bought by keepers of private zoos and the illegal killing of horses, but also because it is a stark reminder that, in this tiny island, there are tigers, jaguars, lions and other non-native (man-eating) animals roaming fairly freely in our midst" (Anon, 2019).

## Conclusion

Equines have been integral to life on the Maltese archipelago for at least one thousand years. At the beginning of the period under review, feral donkeys were a source of income for hunter-gatherers, mainly from Sicily. At the end of the eleventh century, Count Roger of Sicily conquered the islands, a feat he might not have achieved without his horse cavalry. In the fourteenth

century, wealthier individuals could obtain land blocks using horses as collateral, with mounted men pledged to fight for the Knights of St John if needed. Throughout the period until the early eighteenth century, ridden donkeys and mules, and to a lesser extent horses, were the primary means of travel across the islands. In the mid-nineteenth century, wheeled vehicles drawn by horses and mules replaced donkeys as the main mode of transport for people. Although little acknowledged, equines historically provided energy for agriculture, contributing to the islands' food security and overall human welfare. This role gradually diminished during the twentieth century with the replacement of "horsepower" by the internal combustion engine. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, donkeys and mules had almost disappeared from the islands. In this period, horses provided entertainment in sports such as racing and polo, as well as for leisure activities and the emergence of hippotherapy. Horse numbers in the third decade of the third millennium are probably higher than ever on the islands, and it can be expected that this increased number will persist as sport and leisure activities assume greater importance in the human scale of value.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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