

## OLD SMOKING PIPES

Guido Lanfranco

In L-IMNARA No. 16 (Vol. 4 No. 3) published 1994 for 1992, pages 62 to 65, Mr. John Wood contributed an article "Pipa tal-Qasba" which discussed an interesting aspect of Maltese folk life, pipe smoking. In a telephone conversation during his recent visit to Malta, I promised him that I would try to obtain more information on the subject. Such information on old pipes appears very scanty and uncertain.

I happen to have an hour's weekly programme on RTK Radio about local folklore, which includes the facility of phone-ins by listeners. I availed myself of this opportunity to dedicate one programme, among other things, to try to obtain information on the subject of old smoking pipes. Considering the elusiveness of the subject, I managed to solicit a few words from three listeners, which may either confirm or contribute to what is already known. I have transcribed the relevant sections of a recording of the programme which took place on 10th August 1994. My programme forms part of a longer session produced by Susan Mulvaney. I am herewith giving a translation from the Maltese originals, but have left out my own questions and remarks which I used to solicit information:

(i) "Plaster pipes used to come in wooden boxes packed in straw, and used to be sold by a man (I forget his surname), but then we were children, we used to call him Mr. Karm. His shop was in St. John Street steps, (Valletta), leading down to Ta' Ġiezu church. Sailors used to go in and buy these pipes. The boxes were big, wooden ones; they (the pipes) came in quantities. We used to open the boxes for him. When a pipe accidentally broke, he gave it to us, and we used to put a matchstick to bridge the break and played at smoking pipes. They were all white, smooth, and sold at one penny each, also bought by some old men from the villages. He was an agent. I was then about eight years old, now I am fifty six" (male caller formerly of Valletta).

(ii) "There was a man who made pipes...an old man he was...; all the pipes he sold he made himself out of clay...he worked with his hands (no moulds)...he had this knack of making them. There were people who took a piece of reed, cut a length above the node to form a cup, then found a thin reed, made a hole on the side of the cup, and thus made a pipe. Red ones used to be imported...the Turks used to bring them; (1) the cups were imported, and then a thin reed inserted for smoking them;...my grandfather used to have many of these." (Karm. Spiteri, Żejtun, 81 years old).

(iii) At Rabat there used to be an old man about sixty years old, who used to work in clay. He used to make also clay pipes, but not for business, but just to use himself or give away to friends; (The cups) were made of clay, and looked like the face of a drunk, or with designs and patterns...He continued to make these pipes, in Bir Riebu area...in a lane...sixty years ago...I was ten years old...my mother used to take me there to buy flow-erpots. He had a potter's wheel. Also these clay pipes, I

remember, were sold by the Turks...they were cream coloured, with nice shapes; they were curved...they cost two pence halfpenny each...he (the Turk) used also to sell sweet sedge root (2), and pipes in a bag over his shoulder." (Tessie Vella, formerly of Rabat, Malta, over 70 years old).

(1) Turk and Turks here stands for North African nationals who used to come over to Malta before the Second World War, selling various small wares and sweets produced in their country.

(2) Sweet sedge roots, obtained from *Cyperus esculentus*, were locally called "Habb għažiż.

---

#### Pipe for Maritime Museum

It was reported in "The Malta Independent" of 29-8-1993 that a sailor's knife in brass scabbard, and a clay pipe were retrieved from the sea near Birgu. These were handed over to the Maritime Museum at Birgu, The curator Mr. Espinosa said that the scabbard could be of the last century, and the pipe may be older still.

---