

Book Review:

1551 – the Siege that Stifled Gozo

Joseph Bezzina
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REVIEWED BY GIOVANNI BONELLO

What scourged Gozo in July 1551 is just too tragic to recount. Never, in the known history of the Maltese Islands, had so much befallen so many in so brief a time. A marauding Ottoman fury virtually annihilated a peaceful rural community. The author uses the verb ‘stifled’ in the book’s title.

I generally applaud political correctness, but that is taking things too far. When almost the entire population of an island is butchered, raped or enslaved; when the entire country is plundered, or handed over to arson; when not one church or chapel is left standing; when the archives are destroyed and the wealth of the land looted; when only relentless devastation survives; bitter words can be the solitary deliverance left from hurt and outrage.

There! That gets my one and only criticism of this fine book off my chest. Joseph Bezzina, probably the most prolific, stubborn and encyclopaedic researcher of the history of his native Gozo, has just published a book – the only one – dedicated exclusively to the major calamity of the nation so dear to his heart – its antecedents, its protagonists, its victims, its politics, its context, its narrative, its aftermaths.

Up to the erection of a rightful memorial in 2016, in the approaches to the Ċittadella, designed by the irrepressibly creative John Grima, nothing in Gozo kept alive the memory of the catastrophe, except for a humble tablet in Italian walled up in a narrow street in 1579, to perpetuate the memory of one of its ‘heroic’ defenders, the Sicilian soldier Bernardo de Opuo, long settled in Gozo.

This solitary memorial leaves many questions unanswered. Why is it topped by a large fleur-de-lis, usually the symbol of the French monarchy, when the grand master of the Order was a Spaniard

who put the blame for the devastations currently suffered by the Order on the alleged cowardice of the French defenders?

Again, it is generally accepted that Opuo was a Sicilian, and yet the tablet says he was from Villa Mirados (or Mirandos, the ‘n’ implied by a ‘macron’, the abbreviating sign ~ between the a and d). No one I know of has managed to identify anywhere in Sicily called Mirados.

Aware that the Ottoman looters had penetrated the Citadel and were advancing on his home, Bernardo stabbed his two teenage daughters and his wife to death to spare them rape and enslavement. He then rushed out in the street to fight the approaching hordes who overcame him and killed him.

It may be me, but I find little heroic in all this. He preferred his wife and daughters dead to their being carnally known by others. That surely salvaged his manly ‘honour’. But did the three females have any say in all this? Who authorised him to appoint himself their mouthpiece and their executioner, and to believe that they would rather be dead than allow his machismo to be dented?

The ferocity unleashed in Gozo by the Muslim invaders can be explained as a personal vendetta of their leader, the awesome corsair and military strategist Turgut Reis, popularly known as Dragut. He was no stranger to Gozo – before 1551, he had already stormed the island at least three times, in minor but bloody razzie.

In 1544, on his return from a lightning raid in which he had captured several Gozitans for ransom, the Governor of Gozo, Fra Juan Ximenes, bravely retaliated and, in the scuffle, Dragut’s brother was killed.

The corsair asked for the return of his body to give it proper Muslim burial, but the governor refused and instead mockingly roasted the corpse on an open fire to outrage Dragut. The corsair swore revenge and served it on the inhabitants seven years later. Is it ironic that both brothers were killed in the Maltese islands, Dragut in 1565, quite likely by friendly fire.

The 1551 Gozo Siege was not only cowardice, looting, evil and defeat. It also gave the lie to the fabled generosity of the Maltese. Deep down, these Muslim (or Christian) razzie camouflaged, and rather thinly, thriving business enterprises. Apart from plundering everything worth anything, the corsairs saw themselves as cutting-edge entrepreneurs – they captured as many people as possible, in the expectation of selling them off as slaves, or, better still, of raking in handsome profits by their subsequent ransom. A roaring business. All legit commerce carried out in recognised slave marts by ‘official’ slavery middlemen.

Once captured, slaves were left with only one hope of regaining their freedom – that of paying the ransom money requested by their captors. The Order of Malta had an official policy of not shelling out one dime for the ransom of captive knights. Once they fell into enemy hands, they were really and truly on their own.

If the captive, knight or layman, happened to be wealthy, or belong to a family that was, he or she arranged for the money to be paid by digging into private wealth. If, on the other hand, they had no means, the only hope of regaining freedom lay in good heart of philanthropists, private or organised. In the 1551 Gozo razzia, it is estimated that at least 5000 (others say more) Gozitans, knights and soldiers, ended captives in Turkey and North Africa.

A public subscription was immediately launched throughout every corner of Malta to raise funds for the ransom of the captives. In spite of the best efforts of the organisers, backed by the promise of extravagant spiritual indulgences, the outcome proved devastatingly unspectacular – the whole of Malta only contributed a beggarly 56 ounces in total, barely enough to buy back three or four captives, let alone 5000. The myth of the boundless unselfishness of the Maltese was put to the test, with problematic results.



Juan de Homedes y Coscón (1477-1553), the 47th grand master of the Order and the fourth in Malta (1536-1553), by a French engraver. Photo: Daniel Cilia.

The fate of the commander of Gozo, Fra Galatian de Sesse, proves emblematic of the unpredictable fortunes of those in the public eye. Appointed governor in recognition of his acknowledged military valour, in defeat he ended vilified, persecuted, humiliated, enslaved in Turkey and imprisoned on his return to Malta after negotiating his ransom.

His surrender to the heathen Muslims of a Christian decrepit fortress, which he was defending with the meagre aid of very few soldiers and of one solitary British gunner, proved an indelible stain on the honour of a knight of St John.

What thundered the prosecutor’s hollow rhetoric during the governor’s trial held while still in captivity? A knight of St John dies rather than surrender to the infidel. If he accepts to defend a fortress, he also accepts that the fortress would be his grave. De Sesse was only released from prison by La Sengle on the grand master’s deathbed in 1557.



'Il-Ġebbla tal-Halfa', on the east coast of Gozo, where, according to legend, Dragut took a 'halfa' (an oath) to avenge the burning of his brother by the Gozitans during a razzia in 1544. Photo: Paul Falzon.

It took many long years to repopulate Gozo, by the trickle of returning ransomed captives, and by the invasion of wily Maltese and foreign squatters who 'colonised', read misappropriated, the rich estates abandoned by the wretched Gozitans.

This gave rise to a myriad bouts of litigation during the period of the Order, some of which dragged on up to the 19th century, exacerbated by the fact that most notarial records had been destroyed or transferred to Constantinople. Normality somehow limped back, but it took aeons for all the wounds to heal.

Part of Bezzina's fascinating narrative concerns those many Gozitans who never made it back to their homeland, either because of their inability to put up a ransom or because they chose to. Some hard evidence survives as to their fate, supplemented by credible legends. In Tarhuna, to the south-east of Tripoli, their descendants survive to this day. The destiny of the many sold as slaves in Constantinople is just as intriguing, but less linear.

A number of valiant historians had taken the Gozo siege as a focal point of their research, among others Godfrey Wettinger, Stanley Fiorini and Edward R. Leopardi, their contributions nothing short of precious and trailblazing. But it had to be Mgr Bezzina to weave all the strands together, adding his own meticulous studies, into one complete and organic reader-friendly narrative, flowingly recounted, though academically buttressed and structured. I could not discover one detail omitted or one fact warped.

This is the first and only book on the Gozo calamity, a nightmare that the passage of almost 500 years has not exorcised, exuberantly illustrated, enriching alike to scholars and readers with inquisitive minds. The Ministry for Gozo, which munificently sponsored this publication, has also pledged its widest dissemination in schools and elsewhere. The nation thanks.