

# The First Traces of Education In Gozo

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Education is one of the most ancient concerns of mankind. Its history is largely the history of development of Society. The taching of skills and knowledge to the young, whatever the forms and methods it takes, is a phenomenon known even to primitive man. The Phoenicians had their schools; so too the Egyptians. The classical Greeks were famous for their learning. The Romans considered themselves practical men and their education was closely associated with law, rhetoric, military and science and the art of government. Even the Church fostered the provision of schools throughout the ages. Learning was preserved in monasteries and in Seminaries during the Middle Ages. Yet during the course of human history, there came times when education as a whole lost its vitality and meaning.

What system of education did ever exist in Malta and Gozo during all these times? It is common knowledge to all scholars of local history that our forefathers were able to acquire a rich culture. This highly elevated culture is forever reflected in monuments which are the pride of our race. But no documentary evidence survives to throw light on any existing educational system in the classical and early Christian era. Nor have we any records of established schools at one time or another.

One may perhaps assume that some form of private schooling existed in the first millennium of the Christian era, run by ecclesiastics. This assumption gathers more wiewght when it is considered in the light of knowledge of the civilizing mission the Church had committed itself to. <sup>1</sup> The echo of the cultural rebirth promoted by Charlemagne <sup>2</sup> may have as well affected Malta and Gozo in a positive way. The Arab period is a totally dark era in our history <sup>3</sup>, let alone education development itself. A revival in education under the first Norman ruler, Count Roger of Normandy must necessarily have taken place. Count Roger, it will be remembered had seen to the ecclesiastical organization of our islands. <sup>4</sup> Any system of education instituted by Count Roger must have received a stronger impetus under his successors; it is worth noting that during the second half of the century all cathedrals were directed to see to the instruction of the public by the third Lateran Council (1179). <sup>5</sup>

By the time of the arrival of the Knights' Order, education had already established deep roots in the island of Malta, thanks to the various religious orders, among them the Minor Conventuals, the Augustinians and the Doinicans. This goes back to the fifteenth century. About these, Monsignor Mifsud writes:

“Gli ospizi e gli ospedali sotto la direzione di religiose, quali le benedettine in S. Pietro ed in Sta. Scolastica al Notabile, dei Francescani, al Rabato, dipendenti e sussidiate dall'Universita, rappresentavano nel passato le scuole ossia gli asili infantili di quest isola” <sup>6</sup>

As indicated here, the Università, or local government also gave its contribution to the cause of education. About Gozo in particu-

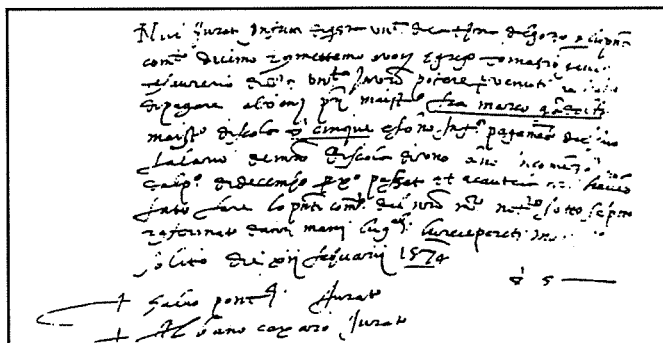
lar, next to nothing is known or proven about all these times. However it cannot be ruled out that some Gozitan young ones had the good fortune of acquiring some form of elementary instruction admittedly inadequate - provided by some local priest. Neither can we exclude the assumption that the Gozitan community of Jews, however small it might have been, until their expulsion in 1492, had its own school besides its synagogue. <sup>7</sup>

The Gozo Universita or Commune was first instituted in the fourteenth century to serve local interests and administer the daily affairs of the island. <sup>8</sup> There can be hardly any doubt about it that this local institution, like its counterpart in Malta, did everything in its power to better the standards of education in Gozo.

Still, this cannot be confirmed until the second half of the sixteenth century. In fact the first written evidence to be found still existing as regards to education in Gozo goes back to the 12 th February of the year 1574. Here one finds that the Gozo Universita had a public school, under the direction of the Augustinian Father Mark Gandolfo. In this venture, the Universita' paid Fr. Gandolfo the sum of five scudi per year with effect from December 1st 1573. <sup>9</sup> The rent payments for the school premises were to be made by the school-master himself. Thus it can be concluded that in 1573 a government school already existed in Gozo.

As documented in the Gozo Universita's archives, it was a tradition that the same school-master (when being an ecclesiastic) carried out the Lent sermons in the Gozo Matrice. Because of this Father Gandolfo was paid five more scudi. Most probably he did not continue with his teaching career for long since there are not any more references to him in the archives. Yet another source indicates that Father Gandolfo still resided in Gozo in 1580. <sup>10</sup>

The fact that the school was closed down is reinforced by the information given by Father Lawrence Apapis (Apap) , is the Gozo Vigar “Presbyter Gaulorum et Vicarius”, to Monsignor Dusina, during the latter's historic visit to Gozo in 1575. Fr. Apapis did inform Dusina that there was no “Maestro di Scuola” in Gozo, but the Deacons as well as the Rector of the principal church there also complained that no expenses for paying a “Magister” were provided out of the ecclesiastical funds. <sup>11</sup>



The oldest document regarding education in Gozo. It shows the payment of five scudi to Father Mark Gandolfo as school-master. (NAG UG Acta et Neg., Vol. I, p. 81v)

*Handwritten inscription in Italian, likely a payment record for educational services. The text is dense and cursive, mentioning names like 'Antonio di Sontoro' and dates like '1576'.*

This inscription shows the payment made to Fr. Antonio di Sontoro for his educational services. (NAG UG Acta et Neg. Vol. I, pp.184r - 184v)

It is more than evident that the problem for schooling more than anything else was the lack of funds.

Furthermore, the Gozo Matrice refused to cover the expenses needed for educating deacons. <sup>12</sup> Most probably Fr. Gandolfo quit the school because his payment issued by the Università' was never supplemented by increased payment from the Matrice.

The first payment to be traced for another school-master dates to 22nd November 1576. Kol Anton di Sontoro was paid the sum of four scudi and two tari for his teaching services covering a period of our months (September - December 1576).<sup>13</sup> To maintain and run the school, the Università had to increase the salary of five scudi to twelve and a half scudi annually for the master. On 17th June 1577 Sontoro was paid again for his services. <sup>14</sup> Accounts also exist of Francis Zoza covering the payment of one scudo, eight tari and ten grano for teaching young pupils.<sup>15</sup> The next payment to be found is again attributed to Sontoro. Its amount is of seven scudi, three tari and ten grano. It was executed on 16th May 1578.<sup>16</sup>

The next appointment of a school-master is that of the Augustinian Father Joseph Xiberras. He was first paid as a school master on 13th October 1579.<sup>17</sup> Xiberras conducted the Lent preaches for the same year in the Gozo Cathedral (then Matrice). The next payment to be found regarding Xiberras, covers the period between January 1st and April 30th 1584.<sup>18</sup>

During this time one notices the re-emergence of Fr. Gandolfo. He ran the school between August and March 1585. No further mention is made of him. Once more the Università's school was closed down in this period and no more accounts of payments are to be found in the archives until late 1587. Even Fr. Joseph Xiberras re-emerges at this time. He was granted the salary of twenty-five scudi per year for his contributions to education and as a Lent preacher. <sup>19</sup>

The same problem kept cropping up now and again. The school had to close down because of financial problems. Payments were often given in arrears or not given at all. The school - masters were frustrated because of this situation. Very often the

local Matrice did not provide its due contributions of money for schooling, for some reason or another; the local government had to bear the financial burden alone as a result. To add insult to injury the school-masters were expected to cover some of the school expenses themselves.

But such a chaotic situation could not be accepted for a long time. To provide the pupils with a new teacher the officials of the Università' sought the services of Father Bartilmew Haber, guaranteeing that he would be paid his due salary. Fr. Haber accepted the post and began to run the school towards the end of 1591. However, more that once did Fr Haber protest at the Università' and the Grand Master for not being provided with his due salary, claiming that his life was being rendered a miserable one.

The Grand Master sought to find a solution to the problem and the first evidence of a salary to be paid to Fr Haber is written under the date of 21st November 1594. He was paid the sum of eight scudi and four tari'. <sup>20</sup> Accounts of payments are also found indicating the payment given to one of the officials, Saviour Pontremoli covering his expenses for crossing over to Malta with the aim of presenting Fr. Haber's protest to the Grand Maser. <sup>21</sup> All this shows the resolve on the part of the local Università' in maintaining some form of education in Gozo. The next accounts bearing Haber's name and payments are written in the documents under the date of 4th July 1598. He was paid one scudo for the month of May. In a petition made by Fr. Haber in August 1617, he claims that his salary as a school teacher employed by the Università', was rather low, considering his long service. <sup>22</sup>

In 1618, a Gozitan benefactor named Dr. Nicholas Mahnuq bequeathed all his property to the Jesuits on condition that they open a college in what is now Victoria, i.e. outside the walls of the citadel. The Jesuits were, at first, elated at the bequest. They sent Fathers Lucius Bonello and Angelo Caruana to start implementing the project. Unfortunately, for some reason or another the project never materialise. In accordance with the conditions given by the testament, the accumulated property, therefore, passed on to the Dominican Order, who were bound by the same conditions. Once more all hopes were dashed and Dr. Mahnuq's desires were never implemented. <sup>23</sup> the school was never erected and the Gozitan children once more could get access to their right to be educated through the Università' school, only when it was functioning.

Fr. Haber's career of teaching continued right through the 1640's until his retirement after his services had exceeded fifty years. His annual salary increased to thirty scudi with effect from 5th December 1636. He enjoyed this salary until his retirement six years later. <sup>24</sup>

*Handwritten document snippet showing a payment record. The text is dense and cursive, mentioning 'Fr. Haber' and a date '21st November 1594'.*

The first salary given to Fr. Haber. It amounts to the sum of eight scudi and 4 tari and it bears the date of 21st November 1594. (Nag UG Acta et Neg. Vol. II, p. 413v)







took over the Islands, the school was closed down but was reopened in 1802.<sup>52</sup> In 1826 it had a text-book printed at Livorno.<sup>53</sup> Later it was described as

“public school with only one master, who teaches forty six boys the Italian, Latin and English Languages, arithmetic and writing, five days a week, and six hours a day”.<sup>54</sup>

The Archives of the Gozo Università' stop short of recording the day-to-day running of the school's and the curricula used. No light is thrown on the schools' buildings, examinations, discipline and rules. All these aspects are lost in the mist of antiquity. The written records of the Gozo Università' are exclusively concerned with the registering of successive school-masters and their salaries. Much is left to be desired in the chronicles.

Yet what survives still has great historic value in a way that it invites us to draw some conclusions without the danger of speculating too much.

The records show that the Gozo Università' used to finance successive schools in Gozo. These schools were run and controlled by priests. It seems that the Università' considered priests as the only ones fit for such positions. This shows that the possibility of a layman being a headmaster was itself still inconceivable. Obviously the general impression obtained is that these schools were geared for those boys intending to become priests or those who aimed for overseas scholarships. The fact that the local church used to exert its influence in local education, adds more weight to this assumption.

No doubt then that the curricula imparted in these schools were very narrow by modern standards. As often indicated grammar dominated everything else. Most probably Latin and religious instruction occupied the major parts of the time-table. Still this level of education would have satisfied the standards of the day.

All in all the local Università' had always tried its best to maintain some form of education in Gozo. With the passage of time some private schools were established. This reflected growing interest in learning.

Nevertheless the first written traces of education in Gozo show that there was no organized and coherent system of schooling. The majority of the islanders were not yet prepared to accept schooling as an established institution. Agriculture, no less than religion was a feature of Gozitan life.<sup>55</sup> The country folk received their 'education' through sermons and church attendance. The young used to learn their job from their fathers and kept in touch with the world through gossip.

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17. *Id. Ibid.*
18. *Id. Ibid.*
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