

# DE SOLDANIS: APPROACHES TO A BIOGRAPHY\*

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The subject of my lecture today is a Gozitan ecclesiastic whose multi-faceted activity as historian, grammarian, lexicographer, controversialist and librarian marks him out as an outstanding eighteenth century man of letters.

Many of you here this evening will be familiar with the basic facts concerning Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis, which one can briefly summarise here. Born at Rabat, in Gozo, on 31 October 1712, he studied Latin and other languages in Malta,<sup>1</sup> and was appointed Canon of the Collegiate Church of Gozo at the early age of seventeen, when he was not yet ordained priest. He studied Philosophy and Theology at the Jesuits' College in Valletta. De Soldanis also studied Law, graduating from the University of Padua, in Italy. His publications include a grammar of the Maltese language, which he considered as a direct survivor from the

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1 In a 'Lettera Responsiva... sopra i Bordonì' included in I. S. Mifsud's *Biblioteca Maltese* (Malta, 1764), 386, de Soldanis refers to his early youth when he lived in Malta ('*allorché facevo io dimora in Malta nella mia tenera età*'). See also NLM Libr. 358 – *Biografia del Canonico Don Francesco Agius de Soldanis*. A note dated 6 March 1891 at the end of this sketch states that it was copied from a manuscript existing in the Gozo Public Library.

original Punic language. As a member of at least four Italian academies he was held in high esteem and kept up a steady correspondence with some of their prominent members. In 1763 he was appointed first Librarian of what is now known as the National Library. He died on 30 January 1770.

These data about de Soldanis have been known for at least 216 years, ever since his friend and colleague Count G. A. Ciantar included a brief biographical sketch of the Gozitan Canon in his *Malta Illustrata* in 1780.<sup>2</sup> Interesting comments by G. A. Vassallo appeared in *L'Arte* in 1865. In 1928 and subsequent years an intelligent interest in de Soldanis' pioneering work set in with the publication of a study by G. Curmi, who not only reproduced de Soldanis' first-ever full description of the old marriage customs of the Maltese but also his modest collection of 387 proverbs. To this period also belongs Mgr. G. Farrugia's Maltese translation of de Soldanis' history of Gozo, which was later published by Government in two volumes.

For many years after the Second World War there was a sustained scholarly interest in academic circles, encouraged by the Chair of Maltese at the University, at that time held by Prof. J. Aquilina. This interest resulted, *inter alia*, in the publication of de Soldanis' *Djalogi*, edited by the present lecturer in 1947 and later translated into English by D. Marshall in 1971. Three theses for the degree of Master of Arts were also presented – one on the Romance element in his Dictionary by M. R. Gatt (1974); another, by E. Gatt, on the Semitic element (1984), while J. Zammit Ciantar utilized the toponymic terms registered by de Soldanis for his thesis 'A Linguistic Study of Gozitan Toponymy' presented for M.A. in 1978. Short articles of a general nature appear from time to time.

2 *Malta Illustrata, ovvero Descrizione di Malta... del Commendatore F. Giovan Francesco Abela... corretta, accresciuta e continovata dal Conte Giovannantonio Ciantar, Libro IV Not. IV (Malta, 1780), 590-92.*

However, this is just a beginning. We are in no way claiming that we know enough about de Soldanis and his work; on the contrary, we stress that a definite biography has become an urgent desideratum. In the short time at my disposal I shall suggest a few approaches to such an undertaking by indicating some fresh biographical details gleaned over a number of years from available manuscript and printed sources. I hope that my sympathy with my subject will not serve as an opportunity for panegyric but rather to clear existing doubts and to present de Soldanis primarily as a human being conscious of the principal currents of contemporary European, mainly Italian culture. In particular I shall stress the importance of utilising surviving correspondence of a familiar kind, diaries and letters to intimate friends not written with a view to publication, in order to illustrate as much as possible the full personality of our subject.

One could usefully mention here that Gianpier Francesco was not an only son. There were at least three other brothers in the Agius family, all of them possessed of some measure of learning and in the employ of the Order. Fra Melchior Agius held the post of sacristan at the Conventual Church of St John. He was the author of *Il Tesoro delle Sacre Reliquie conservate in Malta nella maggior Chiesa Conventuale di San Giovanni Battista dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano pubblicato dal Sacerdote F. Melchior Agius Religioso del dett' Ordine e consagrato all'Ecc. F. Giacomo Francesco de Chambray Balì dello stess' Ordine*. This 14-page booklet was published in Rome in 1750 by the same Generoso Salomoni who issued de Soldanis' Maltese Grammar during the same year. On 12 June 1773 Melchior bequeathed the fifth part of his removable property to Fr Francesco Xuereb, nephew to the Agius brothers.<sup>3</sup> Fra Salvatore Agius had served as Hospital Chaplain for some years and was *Fra Cappellano*

3 NLM Libr. 1146 ii, p. 241.

*d'Obbedienza Magistrale* when he died on 28 May 1762 at the age of about 45 years.<sup>4</sup> Fra Giuseppe Agius, who had some literary pretensions, was the author of a diary recording useful details of life and events in eighteenth century Malta. For many years he was Chaplain at the *Camerata*, and later *Maestro dei Diaconi* at the Conventual Church of St John. When Jacques de Chambray died on 8 April 1756 he wrote a sonnet extolling the virtues and merits of the distinguished Knight.<sup>5</sup>

For most of his life, and I may say to this very day, de Soldanis was known by the title of Canon. We have already seen that he was appointed Canon of the Collegiate Church of Gozo at the early age of seventeen. Bishop Alpheran de Bussan (1728-1757) must have seen unequivocal signs of rare intellectual powers in this precocious Gozitan youth that made him extend to de Soldanis protection and preferment in his ecclesiastical career. In 1750, at the age of 38, de Soldanis had tried, unsuccessfully, to improve his status within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. His close friend and contemporary diarist Ignazio Saverio Mifsud throws light on de Soldanis' efforts to improve his priestly career.

Besides the backing of the local Bishop, in seeking ecclesiastical preferment de Soldanis also sought, not necessarily successfully, the patronage of high-ranking Princes of the Church in Rome. In 1750 he had set his eyes on a vacant seat of Canon at the Malta Cathedral. But Cardinal Portocarrero, whom he already knew, wrote from Rome on 6 October 1750 to inform him that the seat was intended for someone else. There was nothing more that he, Portocarrero, could do except to wait for a more propitious occasion to intervene on de Soldanis' behalf.<sup>6</sup>

4 NLM Libr. 13, p. 826.

5 Ibid., pp. 91, 109; Libr. 1146 ii, pp. 195, 279, 281.

6 NLM Libr. 155, f. 217v.

On 26 June 1753 Mifsud recorded in his diary that the vacant canonry in Gozo created earlier that year by the death of Canon Dalli had been conferred by Bishop Alpheran on Canon D. Francesco Agius '*personaggio molto insigne per aver dato alle stampe...*', while Don Giuseppe Abela, hitherto Master of Ceremonies, was appointed to take de Soldanis' place. However, although de Soldanis had only obtained his new seat as Canon in June of that year, he was to retain his own place and seniority in terms of the authority communicated to him by Mifsud and duly approved by the Bishop.<sup>7</sup> Naturally the other Gozitan canons strongly resented this and they vigorously appealed from the decision. De Soldanis lost his case as he did not contest this point at law and he had to take his place in the usual way.

Six years later, when Archpriest Don Adeodato Formosa, who was also *Provicario* of Gozo, died on 4 September 1759, several candidates competed to fill this important post. Among them was de Soldanis. However, on 10 September Canon Cauchi, who had the reputation of being an exemplary though rather strict ecclesiastic, was appointed *Provicario*.<sup>8</sup> On 10 December 1754 Portocarrero informed de Soldanis that, notwithstanding his good offices and recommendations in the proper quarters, the vacant *Prepositura* at Birkirkara had been conferred on another candidate. Cardinal Domenico Passionei (1682-1761) had previously bluntly stated in a letter addressed to de Soldanis on 20 September 1754 that, having never dared to bother the Pope, not even on behalf of his own nephews, he would certainly not be in a position to do so on behalf of others. The best he could do was to recommend his case to another Cardinal.<sup>9</sup>

7 NLM Libr. 11, p. 253; Libr. 19, ff. 265v, 269r.

8 NLM Libr. 13, pp. 151-53.

9 NLM Libr. 155, f. 209. For information on Cardinal Domenico Passionei see *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica... compilato dal Cavaliere Gaetano Moroni Romano... li* (Venezia, 1851), 271-72.

Mifsud gave more details about this vacancy in his diary. On 28 July 1754 he recorded that de Soldanis was one of the candidates for the post of *Preposito* and on 3 August 1754 he noted that there were six examiners and six candidates for the post. The examination lasted from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. – ‘*cosa che fece stordire a tutti*’. People were saying that de Soldanis had come out very well in all the cases set by the examiners. Some of the cases related to matrimonial matters, others to usury or to the Birkirkara Archpriest’s duties regarding the celebration of Mass. Furthermore, each candidate had to improvise an oration on the theme set down by the Bishop *Videns Hyerusalem flevit super illam*. The choice eventually fell on Don Giacomo Bertis, Parish Priest of Qrendi, who served as Provost of Birkirkara from 1755 to 1769.<sup>10</sup>

Alberico Archinto (1698-1758), who held the important post of Cardinal Secretary of State, was another Prince of the Church who wrote out a testimonial in favour of de Soldanis. He had come to know de Soldanis during his brief stay in Rome in 1758, and had formed a good opinion of him based on the praise-worthy qualities which he possessed not less than on his vast learning. On 21 March 1758 he strongly recommended de Soldanis to Bishop Bartolomeo Rull (1757-1769) for special help and favour in his needs.<sup>11</sup> Rull’s reaction is not known. However, it is significant that de Soldanis dedicated his *Nuova Scuola dell’antica lingua Punica*, which remained unpublished, to Bishop Rull. Cardinal Archinto died shortly after writing this testimonial, aged 60, after holding the high post of Cardinal Secretary of State for only 30 months.<sup>12</sup>

10 NLM Libr. 11, pp. 383, 386, 424, 489, 501, 570, 599, 607. See also E. B. Vella, *Storja ta’ Birkirkara bil-Kollegġjata tagħha* (Malta, 1934), 503.

11 NLM Libr. 2, p. 390.

12 *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastico...* ii (Venezia, 1840), 277. See also *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Treccani) iv (1929), 52.

De Soldanis is well known as the historian of his native Gozo. In writing his *Il Gozo antico-moderno* he set out to do for Gozo what G. F. Abela had done for Malta in 1647. The idea had been maturing in his mind since 1738. In his Foreword *Ai Leggitori* he explained that in 1647 Commendatore Abela had used his learned pen (*'dotta penna'*) to describe Malta but giving only a brief and succinct account of Gozo. Those who wrote after him did exactly the same thing. Then in 1738 the Balì Siniscalco Fra Ferdinando Ernesto de Stadl, who was interested in the annals of these islands, asked de Soldanis to supply further information about Gozo which was not included in Abela's work. At that time de Soldanis hastily put together a brief description. Little by little, carried away by his love of country, he later succeeded in writing a full description.<sup>13</sup>

There is an early reference to *Il Gozo antico-moderno* in the draft of a reply sent to Padre Bonaventura Attardi, who had informed de Soldanis on 26 July 1741 that, at the request of the *Accademia del Buon Gusto*, of Palermo, of which de Soldanis was also a member, he had started work on the history of his native city of S. Filippo. De Soldanis regretted that he could not do the same thing with regard to his *Gozo antico-moderno* because the Grand Master wanted him to preach the Lenten sermons in the Collegiate Church in Gozo. This left him no time to write on other topics.<sup>14</sup>

By the middle of 1742 de Soldanis was still at work on his history of Gozo and he was casting about for a fit person to whom he could dedicate his work. Balì Fra Sestio Dericard,

13 NLM Libr. 145, ff. 8-9. The title of this revised and corrected version of Libr. 145A reads as follows: *Il Gozo antico-moderno e sacro-profano, Isola Mediterranea, adiacente a Malta Africana – consacrato all'eroiche virtù dell'Illmo. e Revmo. Monsignore Fra Don Paolo Alpheran de Bussan Vescovo di Malta e Gozo... dal Sacerdote Gio Pietro Francesco Agius Canonico dell'Insigne Chiesa Collegiata e Matrice del Gozo.*

14 NLM Libr. 155, f. 32v.

a close friend to whom he later dedicated his *Della Lingua Punica* (1750), was kept informed of progress reached in the matter. On 30 July he wrote from Paris stating that it was his considered view that the history of Gozo should be addressed as of right to the Grand Master. He himself would decline such an offer, which more befittingly should be made to his superior, the Grand Master.<sup>15</sup> De Soldanis, however, thought otherwise and on 10 June 1746, as we know, he addressed his work to his life-long benefactor Bishop Alpheran de Bussan.

It also emerges from Dericard's letter of 30 July 1742 that de Soldanis had been urged to undertake this work by both the Balì Stadl *and* Count G. A. Ciantar. De Soldanis appears to have gone out of his way to sing Ciantar's praise in this work. The occasion presented itself when de Soldanis mentioned that he had asked Ciantar's opinion about some coins or medals discovered in Gozo. The mutual respect existing between them comes out very clearly from the text in the manuscript (p. 100), which is here reproduced:

onde conoscendo in Malta il sovraccennato Signor Conte Ciantar, Gentiluomo nostro eruditissimo, in quest'anno (1746) stesso per la sua rara virtù da S.M. Cristianissima aggregato Socio dell'Accademia Reale delle Iscrizioni e Belle Lettere di Parigi, le ho trasmesso alcune di queste monete, il quale con la solita sua bontà dopo qualche tempo si è compiaciuto onorarmi colla risposta, il primo marzo 1746, la quale per essere piena di erudizione a gloria delle due nostre isole, degna della sua penna ho creduto far piacere a li antiquari, ed a Letterati riportarla intera colla moneta seguente gozitana...

Ciantar's reply to de Soldanis reads as follows:

Per appagare in qualche parte il vostro genio erudito, mio reverentissimo Signor Canonico, io ben volentieri vi comunico

15 NLM Libr. 146 iii, f. 198v.



in queste poche linee le osservazioni sopra l'antica medaglia, ultimamente scoperta in codesta isola, vostra Patria. Ma non aspettate da me una lunga e studiata Dissertazione. I miei affari domestici, le varie mie occupazioni letterarie non mi permettono tanto. Mi bisogna dividere me stesso alle mie cure, ed il tempo alle applicazioni. Nè m'è d'uopo di diffondermi in siffatte scuse ...

Due mention must be made here of another Maltese who in various ways helped de Soldanis in establishing contact with prominent men of culture associated with learned academies in Florence and other Italian cities. This was Michel Angelo Grima (1713-1799), well known as a famous surgeon but still in the early years of his career at the time we are speaking of. Since 10 May 1750 he had been in Florence gaining experience at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. De Soldanis had been in correspondence with him from 12 June 1752. Both of them were members of one or more learned academies. De Soldanis belonged to the *Accademia del Buon Gusto*, of Palermo, and to the *Accademia degli Erranti*, of Fermo. Grima was a member of the *Accademia dei Giorgofili ed Etruschi*, of Florence. Both of them were members of the *Accademia degli Apatisti*, of Florence, as well as of the *Accademia Botanica e di Storia Naturale*, of Cortona. It was through Grima's good offices with Ludovico Coltellini, Secretary of the Cortona Academy, that de Soldanis had been admitted to that Academy.

At Grima's request de Soldanis wrote a dissertation on the *glossopietre* which he showed to Giovanni Lami (1697-1770), Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Florence and famous antiquary and man of letters, and for which he (Grima) tried to find a printer. At Grima's suggestion de Soldanis refuted the arguments adduced in 1752 by M. Ladvoat, Librarian of the Sorbonne, and vindicated the Maltese tradition regarding St Paul's Shipwreck on Malta. In 1757 his

dissertation on the subject appeared in French in Avignon, followed by the publication in Venice of an Italian translation in 1758. Grima also promoted the sale of de Soldanis' grammar (1750) directly or by presenting complimentary copies to influential scholars and personalities. As a result of Grima's interest in de Soldanis' work, the latter wrote a sonnet in Maltese in 1758 – an acrostic in praise of Coltellini, whom we have already mentioned. Grima also drafted the wording for the dedication to Dr Giovanni Lami of a book by de Soldanis, most probably his *Annone Cartaginese* (1757).<sup>16</sup>

Time and again in his correspondence de Soldanis shows his readiness to help foreign visitors engaged in scholarly work. To illustrate this trait in his character one could quote his letter of 18 October 1756, addressed to M. Savalet de Bucheloi for onward transmission to the Academy of Sciences in Paris. M. Jacques Lacombe had been sent to Malta by this Academy to study the various aspects of local Natural History, especially those relating to the sea, like marine plants. In strict compliance with the Academy's instructions, before returning to Sicily he wished to spend a few days in Gozo to complete his assignment. De Soldanis gladly welcomed M. Lacombe and his companion, the Parisian painter Antoine Favray, at his home in the Citadel. In his letter he explained that he had done so as a gesture of good will, on the recommendation of the Knight Turgot, a naturalist whom he knew in Malta, and out of respect for the members of the learned Academy.<sup>17</sup> Our National Library holds two works by Lacombe, namely *Dictionnaire portatif des Beaux-Arts ou Abrégé* (Paris, 1753) and *Dizionario portatile delle Belle Arti, ovvero restretto...* (Venice, 1758).

16 Ġ. Cassar Pullicino, 'M. A. Grima u De Soldanis', *Kitba u Kittieba tal-Malti* i (Malta, 1962), 75-81. For information on Giovanni Lami 'celebre letterato ed antiquario italiano', see *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastico...* quoted above, xxxvii (Venezia, 1846), 73-74.

17 NLM Libr. 155, f. 96r.

There were quite a few diarists noting down events and gossip in eighteenth century Malta. The names of Fra Gaetano Reboul, de Soldanis' brother Giuseppe and Ignazio Saverio Mifsud immediately come to mind. De Soldanis himself had, early in his career, recorded the ecclesiastical events and the popular customs observed during the year 1733.<sup>18</sup>

By far the most important of these diaries is that kept by I. S. Mifsud, covering the periods (i) from 1 January 1740 to 13 June 1741 (NLM Libr. 9), (ii) from 1 January 1753 to 31 December 1755 (Libr. 11), and (iii) from 1 January 1756 to 25 December 1765 (Libr. 12, 13 and 14). De Soldanis' name keeps cropping up in Mifsud's diary and there is no doubt that de Soldanis was Mifsud's *'intimo amico e corrispondente'*.

It is to Mifsud that we owe certain details concerning the office of librarian assigned to de Soldanis by the Balì Tencin, founder of what is now known as the National Library.<sup>19</sup> On 20 June 1763 he noted in his diary:

In detto tempo il Balì Tansè faceva mettere in ordine la pubblica libreria, e chiamò a se per aiutarlo il Canonico Dr. D. Francesco Agius del Gozo, il quale essendogli riuscito di fare un Coadiutore, passò nella Valletta, e nel Forfantone, luogo adatto per la libreria, gli fu dato dal Balì un'appartamento con l'assegnamento, come si dice, di dieci scudi per mese.

On Thursday, 11 August 1763, Mifsud called at the Library and spent the whole morning watching de Soldanis at work indexing the books belonging to the two collections combined – Tencin's and Portocarrero's: *'Il Canonico Agius Bibliotecario stava applicato in far l'indice faticosissimo alfabetico, si dei nomi e cognomi delli autori, che delle materie.'*

18 NLM Libr. 142 v, pp. 288-315; Libr. 142 vi, pp. 281-321.

19 See Zammit, 91-139, in the present volume.

During his visit Mifsud took occasion to buy from de Soldanis a number of duplicate publications, which de Soldanis was ready to dispose of, for the price of 40 *scudi*:

Con detta occasione comprò esso scrittore dal medesimo Canonico Agius la gran raccolta delli opuscoli scientifici e filologici del P. abbate Calogero, che sono 51 tometti ed altri libri, che il Canonico aveva, e si disfece per averli trovato nella pubblica libreria, e sono i seguenti, per il prezzo che si nota a futura memoria...

These books included Bosio's *Istoria della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana*, and his *Vita dei Santi della Religione Gerosolimitana*, besides Calogero's collection of 51 booklets, priced at 25 *scudi*.<sup>20</sup>

Between June 1757 and April 1758 de Soldanis was in Italy. It was his third visit to Rome. Accompanying him were Canon Giuseppe Gauci and his brother Abbate Francesco Gauci, who had been recommended to de Soldanis' care by their father Dr Gauci. They had crossed over to Malta on 25 May 1757 to make preparations for their voyage. Leaving Malta on 9 June 1757 they reached Rome on 19 July 1757.<sup>21</sup>

It is not generally known that de Soldanis kept a detailed diary of this visit to Italy, during which *inter alia*, he had graduated in Law in Venice. In June 1758 de Soldanis obtained from Grand Master Pinto the warrant to practise as a lawyer in all the Courts under the jurisdiction of the Grand Master.<sup>22</sup>

20 NLM Libr. 14, pp. 99, 156-57. Similar but more specific information is given in NLM Libr. 358, already quoted, viz. '*avendo costituito suo Coadiutore il Rev. D. Giuseppe Calleja, recossi alla Valletta dove con somma diligenza attese a disporre negli scaffali i libri ed a formare un copioso Indice delle opere quali in quell'epoca trascendevano il numero di dieci mila, comprese in volumi presso a ventimila*'.

21 NLM Libr. 12, pp. 206, 232. The party returned to Malta on Friday, 21 April 1758 (*ibid.*, p. 446).

22 *Ibid.*, p. 480.

Unfortunately this diary, in 568 pages folio size, is not available and may be presumed lost. Ciantar lists the *Itinerario Italico* among the manuscripts left by de Soldanis, adding that its author had left it to Rev. S. Ab. Gianantonio C. Beretta.<sup>23</sup>

Mifsud actually handled and read it during his stay in Gozo in October 1759. The entry in his diary under the date 5 October 1759 reads as follows:

Avendo lo scrittore [i.e. Mifsud], in tutti detti giorni di dimora fatta nel Gozo, letto l'Itinerario ben lungo del Signor Canonico Agius del viaggio da lui fatto per l'Italia nel 1757 e 1758, compreso in un libro Mss in foglio, di carte scritte 568 col titolo Itinerario Italico del 1757 e 1758, descritto dal Dr. Canonico R. Gio Pietro Francesco Agius, lo scrittore osservò e stimò di qui notare le infrascritte cose ...<sup>24</sup>

For most of his life until his appointment as Librarian de Soldanis lived in Gozo. There he felt isolated intellectually, in the midst of the predominantly rustic society of his native Gozo. He lived within the Citadel, indulging in his literary pursuits and drawing invaluable support from his private library made up of belletristic publications, as well as from a small museum containing rare items of antiquarian interest.<sup>25</sup> The appearance of some Maltese friend or foreign personality in Gozo was most welcome. Such a visit was that of Ignazio Saverio Mifsud on the afternoon of 6 October 1759. It seems that Mifsud was paying an official visit to Gozo in his capacity as *Consultore del Sant'Uffizio* (Inquisition) and de Soldanis paid him due deference, introducing him to his fellow-canons of the Collegiate Church as well as to the

23 G. A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata...* Libro IV, Not. IV, p. 591. See also NLM Libr. 14, pp. 100, 118 under dates 21 June and 8 July 1763.

24 NLM Libr. 13, p. 170.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

*Provicario* of Gozo and entertaining him to coffee or lunch at his home with members of the Gozitan Clergy. The following extracts illustrate this aspect of de Soldanis' personality:

A dì 8 Ottobre 1759: Fu lo scrittore a pranzo dal Signor Canonico Agius, assieme col Canonico Mangion, col Signor Canonico Vassallo, Canonico Borg... i quali tutti furono trattati con tutta proprietà.

A dì 10 Ottobre 1759: Di mattino lo scrittore celebrò nella Matrice nell'altare di S. Francesco di Paola; indi passò in casa e bevè il caffè col Signor Canonico Agius...<sup>26</sup>

Ad ora di pranzo ebbe lo scrittore a pranzo i seguenti invitati: il Provicario del Gozo Canonico Cauchi, il Canonico Francesco Agius... Riuscì... il pranzo molto fastoso, e di gusto.<sup>27</sup>

This was not the first time that de Soldanis had hosted Mifsud in Gozo. On 4 July 1756, at the end of a previous visit to Gozo, Mifsud celebrated Mass at the Capuchin friary in Gozo and took leave of the friars. He then called on de Soldanis at his home and stayed with him for lunch before setting out for Mgarr to return to Malta...<sup>28</sup> Mifsud resided in Valletta in the area known as Arcipelago; he also had a garden in Birkirkara, where he spent his holidays.<sup>29</sup>

In July 1749 de Soldanis was informed by the Knight de Guast Jr., *Luogotenente Generale* in Gozo, that the Portuguese Knight Fra Don Giuseppe Almeida, *Falconiere* of the Grand Master, had expressed the desire to see a Maltese Grammar published. In February 1750 he had passed on to Almeida the draft of his manuscript grammar but soon after he took it back as he was leaving for Naples with the learned English Milord Charlemont. Almeida possessed many languages, including Maltese which he could speak fluently

26 Ibid., p. 169.

27 Ibid., p. 172.

28 NLM Libr. 12, pp. 61-62.

29 Ibid., pp. 267, 320.

like a native. He corresponded with the foremost European men of letters and over the years he built up a select library, including manuscripts relating to the affairs of the Order. De Soldanis had first met Almeida in the apartment of Padre Paolo Maria Paciaudi.<sup>30</sup>

1750 happened to be Jubilee Year and de Soldanis had gone to Rome where he stayed on for some months, admiring the magnificent buildings – above all the libraries, especially that of the *Collegio Romano*, where he met the learned Padre Pietro Lazzari, Librarian and Lecturer (*Lettore*) in Ecclesiastical History. During his sojourn in Rome he wrote his work *Della Lingua Punica* addressed to Fra Sestio Angelo Dericard, a Bali of the Order who, while in Malta, enjoyed writing and speaking in this language. De Soldanis and Dericard were old friends – for almost 20 years de Soldanis had been his *Procuratore Generale* in Malta and he continued to correspond with Dericard for many more years after leaving Malta. By letter dated 5 September 1756 from Paris, Chevalier Turgot, a naturalist, informed de Soldanis of Dericard's death, adding that, should de Soldanis ever decide to go to Paris, he (Turgot) would show him how high he esteemed his friendship and if he could be of help to him instead of Dericard he would do it most willingly (*'onde se al luogo del Bali Ricard vi posso in qualche cosa servire lo farò molto volentieri'*).<sup>31</sup>

In his old age, on 26 July 1756, Dericard communicated to de Soldanis the opinion of M. Bonamy, *Historiographe ancien pensionnaire de l'Académie des Belles Lettres* as well as member of the *Académie Royale des Inscriptions* on his grammar. On 16 September 1756 M. Mandoux, *Prêtre habitué de la Paroisse St. Paul*, in Paris, informed de Soldanis that M. Bonamy had read

30 De Soldanis, *Della Lingua Punica*, 67-70.

31 NLM Libr. 146 iii, f. 214v.

his grammar with great satisfaction and that he desired to have him received as *Académicien des Belles Lettres*.<sup>32</sup>

It is not generally known that de Soldanis' literary and artistic connections included a few British personalities. In the Preface to his Maltese grammar (1750, p. 67) he stated that in February of that year he left Malta for Naples with the learned English traveller Milord Charlemont ('*collo studioso viaggiatore Inglese Milord Charlemont*'). He referred again to Charlemont when, in 1751, he wrote an *Apologia... contro Michele Acciard* who had plagiarized his account of the Conspiracy of the Slaves masterminded by Mustapha, Pasha of Rhodes in 1749. We read that the figure of Mustapha shown on the copper engraving in the publication *Mustafâ Bassà di Rodi... o sia la di lui Congiura* (1751) had been drawn by the painter Favray and that at the beginning of 1750 it was copied by the English painter D'Alton 'who had made the tour of the Levant with Milord Charlemont and others with whom I had the good fortune to travel to Naples on their ship' [my translation].<sup>33</sup>

A brief note on these two will not be amiss here. James Caulfield, first Earl of Charlemont (1728-1799) was an Irish statesman who, according to the *Dictionary of National Biography* 'in 1746 went to the Continent, residing for a year in Turin, and afterwards visiting Rome, the Greek islands, Constantinople, the Levant and Egypt.'<sup>34</sup>

The 'signor D'Alton' mentioned in de Soldanis' *Apologia* was Richard Dalton (1715?-1791) 'draughtsman, engraver and librarian to the King'. He was trained as an artist and went to Rome to pursue his studies. The relative entry under his name in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, states that

in 1749 [he] travelled with Roger Kynaston and John Frederick to Naples, South Italy and Sicily, where they joined a party consisting

32 Ibid., f. 213r.

33 NLM Libr. 146 ii, f. 350.

34 *Dictionary of National Biography* ix (London, 1887), 326.



of James Caulfield, Earl of Charlemont, Francis Pierpoint Burton and others. From thence Dalton accompanied Lord Charlemont on his tour of Constantinople, Greece and Egypt. He was the first Englishman to make drawings of the monuments of ancient art in these countries... Some of these he etched and engraved himself... but his drawings and engravings are of little value from either an artistic or an antiquarian point of view.<sup>35</sup>

In 1750 de Soldanis mentioned that he had first met the Portuguese Knight Fra Don Giuseppe Almeida at the apartment of Padre Paciaudi.<sup>36</sup> Paolo Maria Paciaudi (1710-1785), corresponding member of the *Accademia Francese delle Iscrizioni e Belle Arti*, in 1761 accepted the post of Antiquary and Librarian offered to him by the Duke Philip of Parma. His *Memorie de' Gran Maestri del Sovrano Ordine Gerosolimitano*, published in Parma in three volumes in 1780, is well known among collectors of Melitensia. He also wrote some archaeological works, including *Alcune Singolari e Strane Medaglie* (Napoli, 1748).<sup>37</sup> De Soldanis was also interested in medals and inscriptions and he sent him a Greek inscription found in Malta for his views. On 28 September 1748 Paciaudi wrote to de Soldanis from Naples informing him that Mr Askew, whom he already knew, was with him in that city and that he had shown him the inscription but both he and Askew agreed that it was just an impressive imitation (copy) which should be ignored (*ma egli ed io conveniamo che è un sollemnissimo pasticcio da non farne caso*).<sup>38</sup>

Anthony Askew (1722-1772) was a doctor who, in the words of the *Dictionary of National Biography* 'is far better known as a classical scholar than as physician' although 'he

35 *Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplement ii (London, 1901), 108.

36 De Soldanis, *Della Lingua Punica*, 70.

37 *Enciclopedia Cattolica* ix (Città del Vaticano, 1952), 506.

38 NLM Libr. 146 ii, f. 241.

had a good practice and was physician to St. Bartholomew's and to Christ's Hospitals... He helped to develop the taste for curious manuscripts, scarce editions, and fine copies'. Before taking the degree of M.D. and establishing himself in London he studied for one year in Leyden and he then visited Hungary, Athens, Constantinople, Italy and other countries. He is the author of a manuscript volume of Greek inscriptions, now preserved in the British Museum.<sup>39</sup>

Askew's name also figures in a letter to de Soldanis, written in Italian by an Englishman, Thomas Blackburne, in July 1749. He wrote from Messina to thank de Soldanis for the hospitality extended to him during his stay in Gozo and went on to say that at the beginning of June Mr Askew was still in Holland and it was doubtful whether he had returned home. As for him (Blackburne) he had enjoyed his tour of Sicily where he had come across a history of the antiquities of Rome which he had sent to him, knowing that he was keen on antiquities.<sup>40</sup> I have not been able so far to trace any information about Blackburne in the standard reference works consulted.

Like other eighteenth century Maltese men of letters, de Soldanis had a good knowledge of Italian. All along, however, he was conscious that Italian was not his mother tongue and he modestly showed his readiness to have his Italian text improved when still in manuscript. As early as 1746 he stressed in his preface to *Il Gozo antico-moderno* that after 12 years of literary isolation in Gozo he found that his style needed polish and improvement. There is a genuine note of modesty in his words:

39 *Dictionary of National Biography* ii (London, 1885), 192-93. See also E. Benezit, *Dictionnaire critique et documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs & graveurs de tous le temps et de tous les pays...* ii (Paris, 1924), 8.

40 NLM Libr. 146 ii, ff. 243r-244r.

Finalmente se in tutta non scorgerete quel dolce e studiato stile ch'usano oggidì i Letterati, e ch'ancora viene imposto dal buon gusto, deggio essere in qualche modo da Voi compatito, mentre in 12 anni che vi sono, dopo la mia partenza, alla residenza, altro non ho sentito discorrere che sopra le mete de' grani, delle culture dei giardini, dello stato de' seminati per indi pronosticare se l'annata diviene o buona o cattiva, com' ancora sopra il giuoco, caccia e cose simili e non sopra erudizioni letterarie come a molti del Paese converrebbe, così non ho potuto acquistare miglior stile dagli uomini morti che parlano ne' miei pochi libri.<sup>41</sup>

On 29 June 1753 Stefano Borgia (1731-1804), who was later raised to the dignity of Cardinal, informed de Soldanis that, on receipt of the manuscript which he was due to receive through M. A. Grima, he would retouch the text so as to bring it in line with the style currently followed at that time: *'Quando la riceverò... soprattutto vi accomoderò lo stile secondo il gusto del secolo per quanto il mio corto intendimento il comporterà.'*<sup>42</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, we may say that it was partly this concern to polish the style of his Italian text that landed de Soldanis into serious trouble in 1750 in respect of his account of Mustafà Baxà's Turkish Conspiracy.<sup>43</sup> Many of us will recall, from our school days, the 1749 episode in Maltese history known as 'The Conspiracy of the Slaves' encouraged by the presence here, more as a guest than as a slave, of Mustafà, Baxà of Rhodes. What is not generally known is that the discovery of this plot aroused considerable interest and concern abroad and gave rise to several publications recording the event. In particular it seems that the Portuguese Knights were seriously worried about this attempt on the life of the Portuguese Grand

41 NLM Libr. 145, f. 9v.

42 NLM Libr. 146 ii, f. 70r.

43 Cp. Ciappara, 54-55, in the present volume.

Master Emmanuele Pinto. But it was not only that: in a special sense Malta was still considered as the bulwark of the Christian Faith, and therefore any attempt on the life of the Grand Master or against the Order and Malta was tantamount to an attack on Catholicism.<sup>44</sup> I list hereunder, in chronological order, six accounts that appeared within a short time of the events:

*Relazione Istorica della Congiura de' Schiavi Turchi di Malta scoperta li 6 Giugno dell'anno 1749, e tutti li fatti posteriormente seguiti fino al giorno 25 Luglio. In Roma 1749.*

*Relazione Istorica della Congiura de' Schiavi Turchi di Malta scoperta li 6 Giugno dell'Anno corrente 1749, e di tutti li fatti posteriormente seguiti fino al presente giorno 25 Luglio. In Napoli 1749.*

*Relation de la conspiration tramée par le Bacha de Rhodes contre l'isle de Malthe, Paris, de l'Imprimerie de Joseph Bullot, rue S. Etienne d'Egrès, 1749.*

*Ragguaglio della Congiura tramata in Malta dal Mustafà Bassà di Rodi, ed altri schiavi Turchi. Si narra come avessero ordita, come si fusse scoperta, e come si fusse riparata. Consacrato a Sua Altezza Eminentissima Fr. D. Emmanuele Pinto Gran Maestro della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana. Principe di Malta, Gozo, ecc. In Catania 1749.*

*Relaçãõ Exacta, e Verdadeira da Conjuraçãõ, que Mostafâ Baxà de Rhodes intentou fazer na Ilha de Malta, com os escravos Mahometanos, parase fazerem senhores della, em 29 de Junho de 1749 e das circunstancias com que foy descuberta, e castigos, que tiveraõ os complices della. Escrita por hum Cavalleiro Maltez, Residente naquella Ilha, e remetida a esta Corte ao Excellentissimo, e Reverendissimo Senhor Principal Almeida Portugal. Lisboa, 1750.*

44 G. Curmi, 'La valorosa impresa effettuata dai Cristiani schiavi sulla galera 'Lupa' nel 1748 e la congiura dei Turchi in Malta nel 1749', *Malta Letteraria* (January 1931), 15-17.

*Mustafà Bassà di Rodi Schiavo in Malta, o sia La Di Lui Congiura all'Occupazione di Malta descritta da Michele Acciard.*  
In Napoli 1751.

In addition the following items figure among the unpublished manuscripts preserved at the National Library:

Libr. 1

*Sonetti di vari dopo la scoperta della Congiura degli Schiavi*  
(pp. 579-92)

Libr. 18

*Ragguaglio della Congiura tramata in Malta dal Mustafà Bassà di Rodi ed altri schiavi Turchi. Si narra come l'avessero ordita, come si fusse scoperta, e come si fusse riparata* (pp. 309-54).

*Persone tormentate, e poi condannate per causa della ribellione che far doveano i schiavi in questa Città nel dì 29 giugno 1749*  
(pp. 355-68).

*Lettera Scritta [in data 17 maggio 1751] da Salvatore Borgia Accademico Cortonense Al Dotto Signor Canonico Francesco Agius In rapporto al furto letterario fattogli dall'Acciard* (pp. 469-76).

Libr. 142 v

*Relazione mancante in alcune parti della congiura ordita dal Bassà di Rodi* (pp. 495-501).

*Discorso morale sopra la cospirazione di Mustafà già Bassà di Rodi ed altri Turchi schiavi in Malta, scoperta li 6 Giugno 1749, detto [dal Canonico Agius... in favella nostra maltese...] nell'Insigne Chiesa Collegiata dell'Isola del Gozo li 21 Settembre dell'anno 1749* (pp. 505-13).

Libr. 142 vi

*Nove Sonetti sopra Mustafà Bassà creduto autore della congiura degli schiavi* (pp. 611-21).

*Relazione dei castighi pubblici in Malta dei ribelli Turchi* (pp. 623-41).

Soon after the publication of Acciard's book de Soldanis wrote an *Apologia contro Michele Acciard* in which he claimed that he was the real author of the book. Acciard, with whom in 1750 he had left the manuscript of the book when he met him in Naples on his way to Rome, had offered to revise the text and to have it published. Instead, he had plagiarized the work. Acciard denied this, stating that he had based his account on information supplied to him by Sac. Don Michele Casatta, Prince of Colubrano, who had been an eyewitness of the events that had taken place in Malta.

De Soldanis stressed that Acciard had simply added the first two chapters and a few other revisions in the text. From the documents available one can say that de Soldanis was justified in complaining that

i soli primi due (capitoli) indi disfigurò, con aggiungere cose e fatti niente appartenenti all'opera, e lontani dalla mia idea, mutilando al contrario a proprio capriccio quanto faceva al proposito il mio argomento. E questi sono quei due capi inter(a)mente disfigurati e con diverso carattere e stile dall'altro che leggesi negli altri sette.

As if this was not enough, Acciard's book created a most unpleasant situation for de Soldanis. Certain comments in the publication presented the Order in bad light. De Soldanis himself had pointed out the anti-Order tone of certain statements in the book: *'qui comincia far dimostrare un veleno inorpellato il Signor M. A. contro la Religione Gerosolimitana, riporta alcune parole del privilegio che forse giammai avrà mai veduto nè letto.'*<sup>45</sup>

To make matters worse, the book that appeared in Acciard's name was attributed to de Soldanis in Malta, where it was well known that he was writing a book about the conspiracy that failed. And the Order, officially or unofficially, must have expressed its displeasure to the

45 NLM Libr. 142 iv, p. 340.

Ecclesiastical Authorities that a member of the Maltese Clergy should dare to write about the Order in such hostile terms. The matter also reached the Vatican's ear and Pope Benedict XIV himself summoned de Soldanis to explain his conduct. De Soldanis, however, succeeded in proving his innocence to the Pope. We owe this information to de Soldanis' brother Giuseppe Agius who entered the following item in his *Giornale* under the year 1751:

Mio fratello il Canonico dell'isola del Gozo Francesco Agius ebbe una chiamata dal Ssmo Papa Benedetto XIV e dopo aver andato uscì per innocente. Fu imputato che aveva fatto stampare un libro sopra la congiura di Malta, ed in esso toccava la giurisdizione del Gran Maestro che se i Maltesi si ribellassero, essendo mal trattati dal Governo, non chiamansi ribelli.<sup>46</sup>

As a tailpiece one may mention that in 1887 Acciard's account was published in Malta in the original Italian by Messrs Giovanni Muscat, and six years later, in 1893, a Maltese version by Giovanni Faurè appeared under the title *Il-Kongura l-Kbira tal-Irsiera Torok f'Malta mwebbla minn Mustafà Baxà ta' Rodi fiz-żmien li kien irsir – Ġrajja ta' Pajjiżna miktuba bil-Malti minn Giovanni Faurè*. Twenty two years ago a fresh translation (1974) by our friend Michael Galea appeared in the series 'Rumanzi Il-Hajja – Nru 20': under the title *Mustafà Baxà ta' Rodi Isir f'Malta jew Il-Kongura l-Kbira – Rakkont ta' Michele Acciard maqlub għall-Malti minn Michael Galea*.

De Soldanis' name is inextricably linked to the Maltese language. His first publication on the subject, *Della Lingua Punica presentemente usata da' Maltesi* (1750) had for its subtitle *ovvero Nuovi Documenti li quali possono servire di lume all'antica lingua etrusca*. As a point of peculiar bibliographical interest one may mention here that there exist copies of this book with a slightly different imprint. One version gives

46 NLM Libr. 1146 i, p. 821.

the name of the printer '*Per Generoso Salomoni alla Piazza di S. Ignazio. Con licenza de' Superiori*' with the addition of the words *Si vendono in Malta*, while the other version does not give the name of the printer but shows that it was on sale '*Appresso Gregorio Roisecco Mercante Libraro in Piazza Navona*'. In this latter version, which I have seen by courtesy of our Society's President Dr Albert Ganado, the name of Generoso Salomoni appears at page 65 on the title page of the second part of the book, i.e. *Nuova Scuola di Grammatica per agevolmente apprendere la lingua Punica-Maltese*.<sup>47</sup>

De Soldanis' work on the Maltese language echoes these two pet ideas – (i) that Maltese derives directly from the original Punic Language, and (ii) that it may be of help to the study of the Etruscan language. De Soldanis' theories, quite untenable in our time, have earned severe strictures from various scholars. The late Prof. P. P. Saydon, for example, described de Soldanis' grammar as an 'unsuccessful attempt at reducing the Maltese language to grammatical rules'.<sup>48</sup> His statement that 'the words *punico-maltese* reflect the opinion of the author's times, an opinion to which none of the Maltese scholars of today gives his support' may equally apply to the other notion that Maltese may bear some relation to the Etruscan language.

This notwithstanding, one cannot ignore the positive results of this work in which he proposed and actually used Latin characters for writing Maltese. In Lesson XX, § V, of his unpublished revised grammar he stated: '*Un alfabeto della lingua con lettere latine, per poterla e scrivere e leggere venne da me formato al 1750, col parere de' periti Lettori della Sapienza di Roma*

47 A. Ganado, 'Bibliographical Notes on Melitensia – 1', *Melita Historica* xiii, no. 4 (2003), pp. 365-68.

48 P. P. Saydon, 'Bibliographical Aids to the Study of Maltese', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953), 26.



*nelle lingue orientali.*<sup>49</sup> These included ‘il Signor Abbate Eva, Lettore della lingua araba nella Sapienza, e Benefiziato in S. Giovanni Laterano, ed il Signor Abbate Assemani Lettore della Siriaca.’<sup>50</sup>

De Soldanis underlined the beneficial effect of the new alphabet on the adoption of a uniform method for teaching Christian doctrine in these islands.

Anche il fù nostro Zelantissimo Pastore (Mons. Fr. Paolo Alpheran de Bussan) tutto intento a pascere la gregge da Dio a lui commessa, come da più anni nudriva nel suo generoso petto il desiderio di uniformare nel metodo tutta la sua Diocesi per l'istruzione della Dottrina Cristiana, subito che ha scoperto il metodo da me pubblicato, e che con un alfabeto, tutto formato con lettere latine, e con cui si è aperta la strada di scrivere con esse il nostro parlare, cioè le nostre voci e termini, fece pubblicare in Roma la Dottrina Cristiana al 1752 colla traduzione maltese, a proprie spese, e questa così tradotta presentemente da tutti li Curati viene insegnata al loro commesso Popolo, la quale porta il seguente titolo Taghlim Nisrani migiub fil Gharbi &cc. u migiub issa fil Malti mir-Reverendu Cassis Don Franciscu Wzzinu, bl'ordini tall'Illustrissimu, u'Reverendissimu Monsignor F. Paulu Alpheran di Bussan, Arciviscuvu ta Damiata, u'Iskof ta Malta. F'Ruma 1752. Ghant Generosu Salomoni; Fisuk ta Sant Ignaziu, bis-sensia ta Superiuri.<sup>51</sup>

De Soldanis had a clear concept of the need of cultivating the Maltese language:

Io non so se in tutto il mondo, se bene poniamo mente, v'abbia nazione coltivata, la quale restò senza chi abbia faticato a conservare nel suo candore la propria favella! Ogni nazionale con grammatiche e con vocabolari procurò

49 NLM Libr. 144 – *Nuova Scuola dell'antica lingua Punica scoperta nel moderno parlare Maltese e Gozitano aperta agli studenti Maltesi e Forestieri del Canonico Gianfrancesco Agius...* seconda edizione accresciuta, e corretta dall'autore, f. 113v.

50 De Soldanis, *Della Lingua Punica*, 19.

51 NLM Libr. 144, Lezione XX, § VII, ff. 113v-114r.

illustrarla, ornarla, crescerla, e pubblicarla con mille note ed interpretazioni... La sola Malta può gloriarsi di essere nel possesso della illustre ed antica lingua orientale, che conosciamo al mondo, ed insieme dolersi della disavventura di esser mancata, e rimasta senza Grammatica e senza proprio Vocabolario, ma tanto quella che in modello apparve al 1750, oggi ampliata e corretta, quanto questo tutto nuovo si consegna al pubblico, e con cui in avvenire ogni nazionale potrà pregiarsi ed ogni estero valersi per esaminare ed approfittarsene della pregevole antichità, e fecondità della Lingua Punico-Maltese.<sup>52</sup>

De Soldanis went on to say that his Maltese alphabet had not only been accepted locally but also commended by foreign men of letters. We quote here from a few letters addressed to him. L'Abate Stefano Borgia, Secretary of the *Accademia* and later raised to the dignity of Cardinal, became a close friend in 1752.<sup>53</sup> He was full of admiration for de Soldanis' works and augured him a lasting fame with other established literary personalities of that time. This is what he wrote on him:

Seguito la lettura delle vostre opere, benchè con qualche lentezza, e vi assicuro che se seguiterete la via intrapresa farete gran giovamento alla Repubblica Letteraria, e v'immortalarete come Gori, Passeri, Maffei, Olivieri, ed altri celeberrimi Letterati, poichè restituire al Mondo una Lingua, che apportavagli grandissimi vantaggi, quale si è la Punica, come à fatto l'Etrusca per mezzo de' sopradetti valentissimi.<sup>54</sup>

52 Ibid., Lezione XVIII, § VI and VII, f. 106v.

53 NLM Libr. 146 i, f. 139v.

54 Borgia was referring to distinguished personalities in the world of Letters. Scipione Maffei (1675-1755) was the author of the highly esteemed tragedy *Merope* (1714) and of various archaeological studies (*Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico* vii (Torino, 1936), 76). Fabio Olivieri reached the high dignity of Cardinal (*Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastico*... xlviii (1848), 303). Antonio Francesco Gori (1691-1757) was

In the previous year Borgia had sympathised with de Soldanis when Michele Acciard, of Pisa, plagiarized his account of the Conspiracy of the Slaves which took place in 1749. Borgia was quite aware that de Soldanis was working on his dictionary and on a revision of his grammar. On 29 June 1753 he wrote to him from Fermo:

Torno di bel nuovo ad esortarvi a compiere il vostro dizionario che sarà di lume alla Repubblica, ma avvertite che chi fa lume da negli occhi, onde procurate di darlo fuori colla maggior castigatezza possibile. A voi non vi manca il modo, avendovi Messer Domenedio provisto di buoni talenti.<sup>55</sup>

Another encouraging letter was forthcoming from Count Cesare Gaetani, to whom he had sent a copy of his grammar, probably in 1751. Gaetani wrote to him from Syracuse: *'Le auguro dal Cielo anni lunghi e felici per poterli sempre impiegare a gloria non meno sua che di cotesta sua meritevolissima Patria, e a beneficio del Mondo Letterario...'*<sup>56</sup> On 1 December 1759 Gaetani wrote: *'Godò che abbiate dato fine al vostro Dizionario. Quando il vedremo?'*<sup>57</sup>

Fra Bonaventura Attardi, who had already been in correspondence with de Soldanis in 1741,<sup>58</sup> wrote to de Soldanis on 3 June 1752, acknowledging receipt of his Grammar. He added: *'e l'assicuro ch'Ella à tentato una strada mai praticata da nessuno fin'ora, ed io voglio credere che con questa sua nuova fatica s'aprerà la strada ad apprendere con più*

well known for his erudite archaeological works, e.g. *Museum Etruscum*, in 3 volumes, published between 1736 and 1743 (*Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico* v (1935), 892). Giovanni Battista Passeri (1694-1780) was an archaeologist, described by L. A. Muratori as *antiquario maestro del mondo*, who upheld the superiority of the Etruscans over the peoples of antiquity. His publications include *Picturae etruscorum in vasculis* (1767-1770) in 3 volumes. He also completed some of Gori's unfinished works on etruscology (*Grande Dizionario Enciclopedico* viii (1937), 607).

55 NLM Libr. 146 ii, f. 70 rv.

56 NLM Libr. 155, f. 76r.

57 NLM Libr. 146 ii, f. 40r.

58 NLM Libr. 155, ff. 32, 34.

*agevolezza l'Idioma Punico Maltese ito ormai in dimenticanza.'* As regards the 'Vocabolario' appended to the work he commented as follows: *'Al dizionario però bisognarebbe che fosse più copioso per agevolare li curiosi di detto Idioma.'*<sup>59</sup>

Rather surprisingly, de Soldanis states in a letter dated 22 April 1753 that he was all the more encouraged to revise and enlarge his two dissertations published in Rome in 1750 because he had been informed from Florence that they were being translated into English with a view to publication in that language. This information is contained in a manuscript letter belonging to Prof. Alain Blondy, of Sorbonne, who very kindly copied it to Canon John Azzopardi, of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, for eventual use by researchers.<sup>60</sup> The relevant extract from the letter, addressed to a correspondent who has not been identified so far, reads as follows:

Vò proseguendo per ora la fatica de' due lessici promessi, ed ho di molto accresciuto quelle due dissertazioni publicati in Roma l'anno 1750 sulla nostra lingua, incoragito a questa intrapresa, perche sento da Firenze, che si va traducendo in Inglese per imprimere in quell'idioma quel mio picciol trattatello.

Dissenting voices, however, were not lacking. To give one example, Bartolomeo Mifsud (1708-1781), better known as the Capuchin Padre Pelagio, of Żebbuġ, was a learned scholar who pointed out certain shortcomings in de Soldanis' grammar and criticised him for not consulting his friends before he formed his alphabet. He himself devised a Punico-Maltese alphabet, which bears a lengthy title *Alfabeto Punico-Maltese con che facilissimamente da chichesia s'apprende il vero e proprio metodo di parlare, di scrivere e di leggere nell'idioma Maltese, servendosi delle lettere dell'alfabeto*

59 NLM Libr. 146 ii, f. 106r.

60 See Blondy, 71-80, in the present volume.

*latino a cagione non vi sia il Carattere proprio Punico. Opera nuova mai più comparsa alla luce...*<sup>61</sup>

In his revised edition of the *Nuova Scuola* de Soldanis expounded on certain aspects of Maltese that are worth recalling today. In Lesson XIII, § XI, he referred to the numerous loan words from Italian that had crept into the language, to the extent that *'non si può oggi far un discorso intero dal volgo, (sic) senza introdurvi l'uso di alcune italiane parole, ed italiane Sicilianizzate, e Siciliane Italianizzate...'*<sup>62</sup>

In this context he severely criticised the inhabitants of Valletta, especially the women, for wilfully corrupting the Maltese language:

Parlando della Lingua Maltese, non intendo di far menzione di quella usata da certi uomini, e da certe donne Vallettane, poichè questi, avvezzi ad ascoltare il parlare Italiano, e Siciliano, ed altro idioma dalli forestieri, che come sono coabitatori fissati in Malta, e che sempre in gran numero si ritrovano in detta Città, hanno fatto perdere la vera e materna lingua, e la naturale e dilettevole sua pronunzia. Corre gran pericolo che in avvenire andrà alla peggio in loro bocca, perchè si gloriano, particolarmente le moderne femmine, per non dire ancora gli uomini effeminati, di italianizzare il parlar Maltese; così lo impastardiscono, lo corrompono e finalmente non sapranno mai ben parlare nella materna, ch'è la volgare, nemmeno nell'Italiano, ch'è la commune. Non parlerò dunque di questa volontariamente corrotta favella, ch'è da deridersi piuttosto che lodarsi, ma di quella vera materna frequentata da' spassionati Maltesi nella Valletta, francamente, e senza corruttela, usata in tutti gli altri luoghi, e villaggi di Malta e Gozo.<sup>63</sup>

As regards foreigners residing in Malta, including members of the Order, de Soldanis pointed out that these stood to benefit from a knowledge of the language in

61 ACM Ms. 65, pp. 65-78.

62 NLM Libr. 144, f. 80r.

63 Ibid., Lezione XIX, § II, f. 109r.

general use. It was in their interest to be able to understand Maltese rather than run the risk of being deceived by the lower classes. Speaking through an interpreter was neither satisfactory nor convenient. And as for foreigners married to a Maltese, it was ridiculous to find children speaking their mother tongue which the husband, being a foreigner, could not understand.<sup>64</sup>

There were Knights holding high office who had, in fact, mastered the Maltese language and could speak it like a native. They considered themselves lucky that they could understand and speak Maltese because they could thus carry out their duties better and derive greater satisfaction from their work. Among these he mentioned the following: Balì Fra Antonio Escudero *Gran Prior di Navarra*, Balì Fra D. Francesco de Sousa, Balì Fra Giacomo Francesco di Chambray, Commendatore Fra Bernardino de Marbeuf, *Luogotenente del Gran Tesoriere e Capitano della Valletta*, the Knight Fra Paolo Antonio di Viguier *Capitano Comandante delle Guardie di S. A. Ema.*, Fra Luigi Liberale Geoufre, *Priore del Sacro Spedale di Malta*, Monsignor Fra Melchior Alpheran *Priore della Maggiore Chiesa Conventuale di San Giovanni*, il Cavalier Remiking, the Knight Fra Alessandero le Matayer de la Maye *Capitano di una nave della Religione*, Fra D. Pietro Zarzana, the Knight Fra Francesco di Croze Lincel *Comandante de' Sciabecchi*, Commendatore Fra Lorenzo Ildaris, the Knight Fra D. Saverio Doz *Prodomo della Prigione o sia Bagno de' Schiavi*, the Knight Milianchi, Sanese, the Knight Bonelli, Napoletano, the Knight Fra D. Luigi Portoghese, the Knight De Almeida, the Knight D. Ferdinando Melo, and several others.<sup>65</sup>

The Gozitan canon was particularly forceful in stressing the importance of Maltese for those aspiring to the priesthood, as well as for those already ordained. Here he

64 Ibid., Lezione XVII, § VII, ff. 102v-105r.

65 De Soldanis, *Della Lingua Punica*, 62-63; also NLM Libr. 144, ff. 102v-105r.

exposed a serious shortcoming in the educational system of that time. Boys with a vocation for the priesthood went to a grammar school to learn Latin. However, both teachers and pupils found themselves in the unpleasant situation of having to teach, or learn at the same time Italian and Latin – both of them new subjects – through the medium of Maltese, their mother tongue. As a result they studied Latin up to the required standard, while they learned Italian parrotlike, as it was never used outside the school and never heard at home. When they became priests they would have a mediocre, not to say an inadequate knowledge of Latin, or of Italian, which they did not use. After having thus spent the best years of their youth, some of them might have to explain parts of the Breviary, or of the Catechism, in the mother tongue, or in Italian, which they did not understand. They would be incapable of explaining unseen passages from Latin or Italian, or even of writing a letter in Italian, which was neither understood nor spoken.

As a solution de Soldanis argued that teachers should follow his method of reading and writing Maltese in Latin characters and teach it to their pupils who, with the help of his dictionaries, would find the Maltese explained in Italian and Latin, and the Italian explained in Maltese and Latin.

This method would also be of great help to those priests who preached in Maltese and who wrote their sermons in that language, using their own system of writing, which nobody else could make out or understand. There were others who delivered their sermons in Maltese but wrote them in Italian, thus having to translate and preach at the same time, with the result that, unable to find immediately the right Maltese word, they generally used an Italian one, in the process contributing to the further corruption of the Maltese language. For these the above mentioned dictionaries would also be of great help.

De Soldanis finally strongly recommended the use of the alphabet devised by him so that everybody would zealously strive to preserve the language in its pristine purity and perfection. Otherwise it would run the risk of completely perishing and drowning in the sea of oblivion.<sup>66</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen, we have ranged over a vast spectrum of information about an outstanding eighteenth century Gozitan personality. Ours has been an excursion into the material available at the National Library which other researchers may explore more fully than I have been able to do. I have shown elsewhere de Soldanis' contribution to the study of Maltese folklore, suggesting that his activity in this field reflects the influence of G. B. Vico (1668-1744), L. A. Muratori (1672-1750) and other pioneers of folklore studies in Italy. There are other topics that call for study. And the possibility of finding relevant material on de Soldanis in some Gozitan library or friary, or in a private collection should be kept in mind. I speak from personal experience here. While giving the finishing touches to the text of this talk I was able to see, through Dr Ganado's usual readiness to help, a copy of a manuscript entitled *Arme Gentilizie delle Famiglie Maltesi e Gozzitane ed alcune altre; Raccolti dal Dottor Canonico Don Gio. Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis*. It is not a complete work, covering only family names starting with letters A to C. However, it shows that de Soldanis was also interested in local heraldry.

Much of the material we have been talking about is being made public for the first time. To achieve this purpose we have utilised, besides published works, manuscript sources

66 NLM Libr. 144, ff. 112r-114v. For an account of the educational facilities that existed before the arrival of the Society of Jesus in Malta, as well as those that were available contemporaneously with their institution see V. Borg, 'Developments in Education outside the Jesuit *Collegium Melitense*', *Melita Historica* vi, no. 3 (1974), 215-54.



which de Soldanis himself bequeathed to the National Library, of which he was the first Librarian, more than 226 years ago. The approach to our subject was facilitated by the light thrown on the cultural scene of those times by his correspondence with Italian and French men of letters – correspondence that projects his own intellectual biography. We have also shown to what extent his linguistic theories, however untenable by modern standards, were accepted as a valid contribution to learning in his time. Our aim will have been fulfilled if the present work will add a human dimension to the growing image of de Soldanis as an aspiring ecclesiastic, a dedicated scholar, a staunch upholder of Malta's Pauline tradition, a stout promoter of our national language and a proud historian of his native Gozo.

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