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The Establishment of a National Park in Mġarr Ix-Xini: A necessity or an improbability?

Pauline Xerri

Abstract:

Much emphasis is being made worldwide on conservation, green open spaces and wellness. Yet, whilst Gozo is well-known for its natural beauties and rural character, in recent years, there has also been growing criticism over the increasing volume of construction and traffic in Gozo. Whilst some may claim that this is the result of growing economic activity, others see this as a threat to the environment and damaging to the very distinctive character of Gozo which is in itself a pull factor for visitors. Hence, issues pertaining sustainability, conservation and tourism all come into play.

Gozo is still lacking a fully-fledged national park (NP) which provides inhabitants and tourists alike with a green open space showcasing Gozo's biodiversity and rural identity by mostly focusing on elements of conservation, education and recreation. So, does Gozo need a NP?

This research aims to assess the viability of the establishment of a national park in Mgarr ix-Xini which is sustainably managed to enhance conservation in the area whilst maximizing its potential of becoming an ecotourism destination.

Keywords:

Mgarr ix-Xini, Sustainability, National Parks, Ecotourism, Conservation, Management, Policy.

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The Establishment of a National Park in Mġarr ix-Xini: A necessity or an improbability?

Introduction

Gozo is well known for its natural beauties and rural character. Policies and strategies, such as the Malta Tourism Strategy (2021-2030), see an opportunity in Gozo's double insular diversity which ultimately shapes Gozo's character. Gozo's character is considered to be sufficient to create a tangible and effective differentiation factor that enables the island to position itself distinctively from Malta and elsewhere. Hence, there is an opportunity for Gozo to develop as a standalone destination that attracts a specific mix of visitors due to its unique characteristics.

In addition, over the past years, there have been growing concerns over matters of sustainability and conservation both at local and global levels. Apart from the daily activities, there has also been growing recognition that tourism itself can exert pressure on natural and cultural heritage assets and thus impinging on the pull factors which attract tourists in the first place. This would ultimately dilute the quality of the tourist experience itself. Such concerns have been addressed by the Gozo Regional Development

Strategy, which stresses that “it is essential that more emphasis is placed on quality rather than on quantity” (GRDA, 2023, p.28). As a result, the strategy calls for a “shift from mass tourism towards higher quality tourism” (GRDA, 2023, p.28) and the creation of “new ‘anchor’ attraction and leverage editing ones” (GRDA, 2023, p.28). The strategy directly mentions the importance of eco-friendly tourism as one of the tourism activities which can help in attracting higher quality tourism which in turn yields higher revenue.

The strategy also mentions the importance of accessible open spaces. Indeed, one of the policy's goals is to “*achieve a natural network of accessible open spaces within the urban and rural environment for residents and visitors alike in which the island's biodiversity can thrive*” (GRDA, 2023, p.14).

Yet, despite the above-mentioned scenario Gozo is still lacking a fully-fledged national park (NP) which provides inhabitants and tourists alike with an open space showcasing Gozo's biodiversity and rural identity by mostly focusing on elements of conservation, education and recreation.

The aim of this paper is to assess the viability of the establishment of a national park in Mgarr ix-Xini which is sustainably managed to enhance conservation in the area whilst maximizing its potential to become an ecotourism destination.

Literature Review

Small Islands and Sustainable Tourism

The distinctiveness of small islands stems from their detachment from continental areas, their natural and cultural assets and their particular human settlements (Coccossis, 2001). Indeed,

such distinctiveness, which also includes coastal and marine riches, serves as an attraction for tourists. By providing income and employment, tourism is considered to be a development instrument for the economies of small islands (Croes, 2006). Concurrently, it may be argued that without proper planning and management, tourism can potentially cause irreparable damage to the island's cultural and natural heritage, the local population and even to the visitor's experience which is ultimately the basis for tourism development (Coccossis, 2001). Hence, the need for sustainable management in tourism areas.

Given the distinctiveness of small islands and their vulnerability, a double mandate emerges. Hall (2010) highlights the paradox whereby tourism is one of the causes of loss in biodiversity and cultural heritage, but it also serves as a justification for conservation and protection of such. Indeed, whilst tourism stands to benefit from a rich natural and cultural capital, in literature there are arguments showing that tourism can also serve as a tool for the promotion of environmental education which is often an integral part of the concept of protected areas (Hall, 2010). Therefore, conservation managers, who tend to mainly focus on conservation aspects, should also take into account such aspects of tourism (Buckley, 2009). This double mandate invokes the need for sustainable tourism and reinforces the need to control visitor behaviour by placing limitations which ensure ecosystem resilience (Hall, 2008).

Natural and Cultural Heritage Assets

The International Cultural Tourism Charter: Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance (ICOMOS, 1999) adopts a broad interpretation of heritage by combining both cultural and natural assets:

“Heritage is a broad concept and includes the natural as well as the cultural environment. It encompasses landscapes, historic places, sites and built environments, as well as biodiversity, collections, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences.”

(ICOMOS, 1999, p.1)

Whilst acknowledging the challenges and importance of conserving heritage, the charter also establishes that tourism can generate funding for conservation. Thus, the charter presents a set of guiding principles for the development of a sustainable tourism and conservation initiatives (ICOMOS, 1999).

At a European Union (EU) level it is acknowledged that “the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism industry go hand-in-hand as the quality of tourist destinations is strongly influenced by their natural and cultural environment” (European Commission, 2018). Indeed, the EU has set an Agenda for a Sustainable and Competitive European Tourism (EU, 2010), which emphasizes the importance of safeguarding natural and cultural assets of tourist destinations.

Biodiversity and Tourism

Hall (2010) stresses that through its interrelationship with biodiversity and the developing institutional arrangements, tourism can serve as a contributor to sustainable development and also to the validity of the sustainable tourism concept itself. The tourism-biodiversity relationship has been recognised as a global issue, hence the presence of international governance and regulatory structures (Williams, 2008).

A key instrument, to which Malta is a signatory, is the '1992 Convention on Biological Diversity' (CBD) (UN, 1993). The resulting 'Guidelines on biodiversity and tourism development' by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (UN, 2004) are considered to be "one of the relatively few sets of tourism-specific recommendations in multilateral international agreements with respect to the environment" (Hall, 2010, p. 268). The guidelines stipulate that "to be sustainable, tourism development in any destination requires coordinated policy-making, development planning and management. (UN, 2004, p.7)

Although tourism can serve as a market-based contributor to conservation, most countries underuse this source (United Nations, 2017). Therefore, another set of supporting guidelines was issued with the aim of addressing this gap - 'Guidelines for tourism partnerships and concessions for protected areas: Generating sustainable revenues for conservation and development' (United Nations, 2017b). This document provides authorities with a set of guidelines to help in finding a balance between tourism and conservation in protected areas.

At an EU level, the 'Tourism Sector and Biodiversity Conservation: Best Practice Benchmarking' (European Commission, 2010) is a policy document which also provides guidelines for a mutually beneficial tourism-conservation relationship. This document shows the financial potential of biodiversity; therefore, this document also appeals to small and medium companies, hotel owners, international tourism companies, local managers and more (European Commission, 2010). Indirectly this document acknowledges the double mandate mentioned by Hall (2010), by stating that "the tourism sector has both a strong influence on biodiversity loss and a role to play in its conservation" (European Commission, 2010, p.5). This document is also very useful as it

provides an overview of existing policies, legislative measures and best practices in relation to biodiversity and tourism at an EU level.

National Parks, Conservation and Tourism

“A natural park is a delimited territory where natural, historical and cultural elements are protected under a well-established regulation for conservation and sustainable development.”

(Băltescu et al., 2017, p.117)

Dudley (2008) explains that there are various categories of protected areas. For instance, a strict nature reserve is solely focused on biodiversity protection and is a place where human intervention and visitation is highly restricted. However, NPs are “protected areas [which] usually combine ecosystem protection with recreating, subject to zoning” (p. 14).

A protected area, as defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), is “a clearly defined geographical space recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (IUCN, 2008, para 7).

The IUCN also provides one of the earliest definitions of NPs by outlining that:

“a National Park is a relatively large area 1) where one or several ecosystems are not materially altered by human exportation and occupation, where plant and animal species, geomorphological sites and habitats are of special scientific, educative

and recreative interest or which contains a natural landscape of great beauty and 2) where the highest competent authority of the country has taken steps to prevent or to eliminate as soon as possible exploitation or occupation in the whole area and to enforce effectively the respect of ecological, geomorphological or aesthetic features which have led to its establishment and 3) where visitors are allowed to enter, under special conditions, for inspirational, educative, cultural and recreative purposes.”

(IUCN, 1969 A, p.1)

Therefore, this definition implies that national parks are established in large areas which hold ecological importance and in which urbanization has not taken place. Accessibility is controlled so as to ensure proper conservation of the area and management is carried out by an official body. Moreover, this definition also sheds light on the visitor experience since it specifies that NPs need to offer elements of inspiration, education and recreation. However, IUCN further clarifies that whilst being the primary function, nature conservation within NPs is not to be considered as the sole and exclusive component within the area (IUCN, 1973). Hence, NPs may also contain important cultural features.

The IUCN (1973) adds that conservation of natural and cultural assets could be achieved through the system of zoning, whereby areas of such importance are identified and designated to ensure proper preservation and protection. Zoning also allow the establishment of safe passageways for tourism purposes. Thus, whilst conservation remains a primary function of natural parks, a “tourism/administrative zone would not be one designated

primarily for nature conservation, but would be so delimited and located as to create minimum interference with the nature conservation function of the park” (IUCN, 1973, p. 15-16).

In the literature, a common reasoning emerges, focused on the fact that NPs are to be regarded as a “common good”. NPs are therefore established and managed with impartiality by state institutions with the aim of preserving and sustaining biological diversity through conservation (Alemu, 2015). Dudley (2008) identifies the following as comprising a NP:

“protected areas are large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities”

(p. 16)

Hence, when it comes to defining NPs, literature does confirm the link between NPs, conservation and recreation/tourism. Nevertheless, it is also evident that “each country has a different concept to define a national park. There are no rules that can bind the concept of a national park.” (Rhama, 2020, p.3). Yet, through the various definitions of NPs it becomes evident that wise public access is a common component to all.

In literature there is also growing recognition that NPs “play a vital role in the conservation of the world’s biodiversity, in food security and in human health issues” (Shah, 2016, p.1). Indeed, one of the main functions of NPs is the protection of natural habitats, flora and fauna and the upkeep of environmental

stability in surrounding areas. As a result, NPs have proved to be “cornerstones of sustainable development strategies” (Shah, 2015, p.2).

Hence, amongst their various roles, NPs contribute to the preservation of nature and habitats which is in turn a matter of social, political, economic and scientific concern. Indeed, apart from the scientific aspect, a rich and well-managed ecosystem also has a positive correlation with human wellbeing since it elevates the cultural dimension of a society (Lee & Maheswaran, 2011). To this effect, NPs are regarded as publicly owned natural resources since they provide ecological balance and also serve as a source of livelihood for locals. Thus, through the well-being of societies and through income and employment generation, NPs are also regarded as contributors to a nation's economy (Alemu, 2015). Therefore, biodiversity conservation and well managed NPs are to be an integral part of the wider sustainable agenda setting of a country (Lisa et al., 2008). Shah (2016) further adds that NPs “are important tools for the conservation of biological diversity and are cornerstones of sustainable development strategies” (p. 2).

Hence, literature shows the correlation between NPs, conservation, well-being and the economy and emphasizes that the sustainable management of NPs should be prioritized in the policy making process. In fact, there is increasing awareness that NPs have become a unique tool which brings together various “subjective and objective oriented sectors melted like regional economic development, rational use of resources, generating income and creating jobs, research and monitoring, conservation education and, recreation and tourism” (Shah, 2016, p.1).

Yet, although the potential of NPs in terms of conservation, economic benefits and tourism is recognised in literature, there is also awareness of the fact that “roles of NP's might vary according

to the local contexts and the objectives of declaring an area as national park and protected area” (Shah, 2016, p. 2). Hence, the management approach of such public national resources is key. If management does not continuously strive to balance the economic, conservational and tourism aspects within the area, the potential benefits of NPs are not properly maximized or may even be lost, as this may be to the detriment of one of these pillars. Dudley (2008) also emphasized that management is to be regarded as a distinguishing feature of NPs. Since without “sympathetic management” (p.16), conservation would be jeopardized.

National Parks and Ecotourism

Rhama (2020) states that since NPs uphold both concepts of conservation and recreation, this “can be connected with the ecotourism concept because, basically, ecotourism is nature-based tourism that is intended to provide positive impacts on the environment” (p. 4).

The term ecotourism was coined in the 1980s. This was widely regarded as one of the first concrete steps in recognising that tourism can play a role in “environmental conservation, sustainable resource utilisation, and socioeconomic equity” (Yilmaz et. al, 2013, p.6). Indeed, academic and policy relevance of ecotourism gained a strong foothold due to its potential benefits to the economy, environment and local communities (Jafari, 2001).

Literature indicates that ecotourism “strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale” (Honey, 1999, p.25). Hence whilst providing potential for economic development, ecotourism subscribes to the sustainable principles of natural conservation and social responsibility (Teh and Cabanan, 2007). In addition, ecotourism also upholds principles of cultural heritage conservation (Boyd, 2012).

Scholars from both the tourism and environmental academia respectively, regard ecotourism as the most palatable term for the use of nature-based resources, which is based on conservation, learning, recreation and ethical management.

The educational component does provide a direct link between ecotourism and NPs. This is mainly because one of the goals of ecotourism “is to broaden visitor awareness about the conservative meaning of ecotourism destinations. This also becomes the target of a national park establishment that is to become an educational function” (Rhama, 2020, p.5).

Since ecotourism is a natural resource-based practice, as a touristic activity it should focus “primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale) ”(Yilmaz et. al, 2013). Hence, through literature it becomes evident that the management component in ecotourism is crucial since it needs to merge tourism experiences, conservation, and socio-economic sustainability.

Indeed, NPs are regarded as a “major tourism asset” (Eagles and Hillel, 2008, p. 77). Increasingly, in both developed and developing countries alike, tourism generates revenue which proves to be essential in park’s agency budgets. However, as explained by Eagles and Hillel (2008), when it comes to park management, tourism as a contributing factor is often underestimated. Consequently, low investment in NPs maintenance and visitor infrastructure would then jeopardize the quality of the tourism experience being offered by NPs.

In addition, literature emphasizes that tourism is a resource-based activity, proper management and enforcement are essential (Viñals et al., 2016). Indeed, the lack of enforcement leads to the

deterioration of cultural resources and loss of biodiversity, both of which are considered to be a “public good” (Ferraro, 2002, p.1718). McKercher and Du Cross (2002) show that a true partnership between conservation and tourism can only be achieved when each side learns how the other will value, view and seek to use these assets. If, subsequently, both sides are able to collaborate, then commercial and conservational success can be ensured; otherwise the risk of permanent loss of heritage becomes inevitable.

However, it should be noted that studies evaluating visitor behaviour in protected areas show that tourists respond to sustainable measures in a positive way. Therefore, it has become evident that conservation in small islands can be financed through tourism (Machairas and Hovardas, 2005).

Methodology

In order to attain the aim of this research, ‘why’ and ‘how’ research questions were posed, thus making this study an exploratory one. Therefore, through a qualitative approach, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of social, environmental and economic connectivities related to the research topic. Interviews were conducted with major stakeholders – Ministry for Gozo and Planning, MTA, ERA, Xewkija Local Council, Sannat Local Council, Wirt Għawdex and Nature Trust Malta.

Following the presentation of the literature review, as per above, this paper will provide a brief overview of the natural and cultural heritage assets of Mgarr ix-Xini and subsequently present the interview findings.

Mġarr ix-Xini

Situated in the southern coast of Gozo, Mġarr ix-Xini is located between the villages of Sannat and Xewkija. Having escaped the devastating grip of the construction industry, unlike areas such as Xlendi and Marsalforn, Mġarr ix-Xini remains a remote area in Gozo which holds ecological importance and distinct character. Since it encapsulates both a valley and a beach, it remains an area representative of Gozo's traditional countryside and coastal beauty alike. Indeed, Mġarr ix-Xini is considered to be one of the deepest valleys on the island and its location has been considered strategic throughout history. Indeed, its name derives from *magarr*, in Arabic, which refers to a place of loading and unloading and the word *xini* which refers to small ships (Bezzina, 1989).

Through archaeological findings and studies, especially the one conducted by Dr George Azzopardi (2014), it is evident that human presence in the area, although not easily traceable, spans a long time with the oldest settlement dating back to prehistoric times. The most ancient discovery comprises a rubble wall which dates back to the 6th century B.C. Moreover, various cisterns, oil and wine presses and an ancient quarry were also found in the valley (Azzopardi, 2014). Indeed, it emerged that the Mġarr ix-Xini area has long been a source of income and livelihood for inhabitants for a number of centuries. Indeed, the excavations show that inhabitants used to produce wine in September and in October they focused on olive oil production. This goes to show that a mixed economy was present in the area. For instance, a minimum of seventeen rock-cut wine presses have been discovered along the valley (Azzopardi, 2014).

The following is a synopsis of Mġarr ix-Xini's natural and cultural heritage elements:

- Għar ix-Xiħ (Cave and shrine)
- Pumping Station
- Mgarr ix-Xini Tower
- Territorial Markers
- Valley
- Sea (Marine Protected Area)
- Biodiversity (maquis habitats, garrigue, Xanthium Spinosum, Spanish Broom, Shrubby Champion, Silene Fruticosa and more)
- Tree Protected Area (including trees such as Makkja)

It should be noted that Mgarr ix-Xini benefits from various layers of protection emanating from the following legislative measures:

Marine Protected Area:

Pursuant to the Habitats Directive and the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44), the waters of Mgarr ix-Xini are designated as a marine protected area. The status which aims to safeguard marine biodiversity was designated in 2010. Thus, the bay at Mgarr ix-Xini “is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of International Importance (as prescribed under the Habitats Directive) and thus consequently forms part of the Natura 2000 network” (University of Malta, 2018, paragraph 3).

Area of Ecological Importance and Site of Scientific Importance:

Through the Development Planning Act (1992), particularly Government Notice 0937 of 2001, Mgarr ix-Xini and the area known as Ta' Blankas were scheduled for protection due to their ecological and architectural importance. Most of the areas at Mgarr ix-Xini were assigned a Level 1 protection which is the highest level attributed to areas of ecological importance.

Protected Beach

The beach at Mġarr ix-Xini was given the status of a protected beach in 2007 through S.L. 549.42

Tree Protected Area

In 2017, the valley of Mġarr ix-Xini was declared a tree protected area through S.L. 549.123, and G.N. 316 of 2017. This also applies to Ta' Blankas Garden which is near the valley. The primary legislation which established the title of 'tree protected area' is the Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations, 2011 (S.L.549.64). This legislation also establishes that:

“Any tree protection area declared through these regulations shall also form an integral part of the National Ecological Network set up by regulation 5(1) of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats (Protection) Regulations, and is subject to the other provisions of regulation 5 of the said regulations”

(Article 6 (5), Part II, S.L. 549.64, 2011)

Hence, both the valley at Mġarr ix-Xini and Ta' Blankas Garden are both within the National Network.

Scheduled Building Setting

The entire area of Mġarr ix-Xini is designated as Scheduled Building Setting, a status which is reinforced by PA Circular 3/20 (PA, 2020). The circular calls for “particular care” (PA, 2020, p. 1) to be applied when dealing with buildings of this status. Indeed, the circular links a singular building to its surrounding environment. Thus, a holistic approach is adapted. According to the circular:

“Each scheduled building is located within a spatial context with which it relates to in different aspects. The setting is therefore an essential part of the building and the way in which it is experienced. It is the area in which the building is perceived and is therefore a constituent part of the building’s value.”

(PA, 2020, p1)

Within Mġarr ix-Xini there are various features which have their own status and degree of protection as part of the scheduled building setting, with grade 1 being the highest degree of protection. The categories of features *inter alia* range from architecture, archaeology, engineering to ecology. The following are some of the features at Mġarr ix-Xini listed as scheduled property and thus regarded as heritage items:

- Mġarr ix-Xini valley sides and valley watercourse (Grade 3)
- Cave at the mouth of Mġarr ix-Xini bay (Grade 1)
- Victorian Property Markers (Grade 1)
- Various Dwellings (ranging from Grade 3 to 2)
- The buffer zone surrounding pumping station and ancillary elements (No grade applicable)
- Dam (Grade 1)
- Water Chute (Grade 1)
- Pumping Station (Grade 1)
- Spiral Stairwell (Grade 1)
- Aqueduct (Grade 1)
- Sump (Grade 3)
- Dry Stone Wall (Grade 1)
- Rock cut Steps (Grade 3)

- Various features of the Pumping Station such as pump room, generator/ancillary room, ventilation shaft, pipeline, etc (Grade ranging from Grade 3 to Grade 1)

However, Mġarr ix-Xini is not designated as a nature reserve in terms of the Environment Protection Act (1991).

Cultural Heritage Act 2019 (CAP. 445)

The Tower of Mġarr ix-Xini is listed in the national inventory of Malta as outlined in Article 53 of the Cultural Heritage Act 2019. Hence, special protection to cultural heritage assets is established by virtue of being listed in the inventory. Hence, this is also applicable to the tower of Mġarr ix-Xini. The Cultural Heritage Act stipulates that:

“Cultural property and underwater cultural heritage included in the national inventory shall be attributed a level of protection to adequately safeguard the cultural property and underwater cultural heritage”.

(Article 53 (3), Part IX, Cultural Heritage Act, 2019)

Interview Findings

There is general consensus on the establishment of a NP in Mġarr ix-Xini. Interviewees categorically confirmed that the area holds value in terms of natural and cultural heritage. Thus, the area is regarded as an environmental jewel that is worth preserving and is one which holds the magic combination of sea, beach and valley showcasing the typical Maltese and Mediterranean environment. The latter factor is considered by interviewees to be a pull factor for tourists. Moreover, whilst having a rich history which remains

relatively unknown to many, the area also constitutes a living heritage through traditional agricultural activities which are still present in the area, and which are thus a manifestation of Gozo's identity. Many have also commented on the importance of preserving the Pumping Station which is a unique example of industrial heritage in Gozo. Others have mentioned the dark sky heritage which can be easily enjoyed from Mġarr ix-Xini which is one of the few remaining areas lacking artificial lights. Through the interviews, it also became evident that there is a lack of awareness about the area's cultural heritage assets and on its natural richness or ecological importance. Hence, the establishment of a NP is regarded as a mean to preserve the area whilst also ensuring that it is properly enjoyed and appreciated by locals. Various interviewees also mentioned the importance of green open spaces and the correlation with mental and physical wellbeing. In this regard, the establishment of the park was also regarded as a means to safeguard the area from any excessive development and thus securing the area as a green open space.

In addition, arguments presented by Hall (2010) in relation to the emerging double mandate were also confirmed through the interview findings. As argued by some of the interviewees, unsustainable tourism practices have caused irreparable damage to various areas in Gozo, hence the need to protect areas such as Mġarr ix-Xini which remains relatively pristine. Moreover, preserving the site would also elevate the area as a tourism attraction.

In addition, the distinctiveness of small islands, as mentioned in literature, was also reflected in the interviewees' response. Interviewees confirmed that Gozo can maximise on its distinctiveness, particularly through the establishment of a NP in Mġarr ix-Xini, to diversify its tourism product in a sustainable

and innovative way. Thus, as in literature, the link between NPs and tourism was also confirmed. The establishment of a NP is therefore regarded as an opportunity to diversify Gozo's tourism product whilst also having the potential of providing a quality ecotourism experience. There is a general understanding that sustainable tourism, such as ecotourism, can also sustain conservation through funding especially when ecotourism is associated with quality and high-yielding tourists.

Interviewees also discussed the social, conservation and economic aspects of a NP at Mġarr ix-Xini, thus also confirming its correlation with the concept of sustainability as evident in the literature review. The demand for sustainable action, in view of irresponsible human activities, was evident in both literature and interview findings. Indeed, activities such as anchoring and irresponsible parking have been regarded by some interviewees as impinging on the ecological integrity of the area and also on the tourism experience itself.

Literature regards NPs as a common good and a cornerstone of sustainable development, this was also confirmed by interviewees. However, whilst interviewees regard the establishment of a NP as the way forward, they categorically emphasized that the management component is a crucial aspect which may otherwise jeopardise Mġarr ix-Xini's ecological and cultural value. Various interviewees argued that irresponsible management or the lack of it, would lead to overcrowding and irreparable damage to the site. Hence, effective management and enforcement are to be ensured to sustain elements of conservation, sustainability and quality ecotourism experiences. In addition, as in literature, interviewees highlight the need for a sound management structure which is backed up by adequate resources and legal backing to monitor and ensure enforcement.

Stakeholder involvement was regarded as another important element, both prior to the establishment of the park and also during its management. It was argued by various interviewees that involving stakeholders such as locals, farmers, landowners and economic operators would not only ensure a balance between the various interests, but it would also enable such stakeholders to act as guardians of the park. This is especially because the concept of the park would be more inclusive towards the locals and so they would feel more empowered.

Moreover, all participants also emphasized that there should be minimal infrastructural interventions on site to ensure that the area remains as pristine as possible. Hence, the introduction of artificial light or the addition of structures was strongly opposed and also seen as going against the concepts of sustainability and conservation which are crucial pillars of both NPs and ecotourism.

The educational component which is present in theoretical arguments on both NPs and ecotourism was also mentioned by various interviewees. It was argued that apart from educating tourists on Gozo's biodiversity, the establishment of a NP would also help in educating locals and raising awareness about conservation.

Apart from conservation and education, literature also shows that NPs are characterised by a delimited territory. Various interviewees confirmed the need for a fixed footprint for the park at Mgarr ix-Xini. Some also mentioned that the area is rather confined and thus can be managed more easily. Yet, as in literature, various interviewees highlighted the importance of zoning to ensure conservation and sustainability.

The concept of tourism generating funds for conservation was present in both Chapter 2 and interview findings. Various

interviewees mentioned the possibility of funds generated from activities held within the park being redirected to the NP itself for maintenance and conservation purposes.

Conclusion

Therefore, as in literature, interview findings have confirmed the proposal of establishing a NP which is run by principles of sustainability, conservation and ecotourism as a means to protect the area, to enhance awareness, promote recreation and to also generate income for the local population.

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The Gozo Party

1947-1950

Daniel Meilak

Abstract:

The Gozo Party (1947–1950) emerged during a period of constitutional change in Malta, aiming to advocate for Gozo's interests, neglected under centralized governance. Founded by Francesco Masini and prominent Gozitans, it sought to address socio-economic issues, promote local autonomy, and secure representation in Malta's Legislative Assembly. Despite its short life span, the party emphasized Gozo's needs through initiatives like the Gozo Commission and leveraging its pivotal role in government coalitions. It left an indelible mark on Gozo's development during the second half of the twentieth century. The Gozo Party's legacy underscored the importance of self-determination for Gozo, influencing later political developments and local governance frameworks.

Keywords:

Gozo History, Political History, Party Politics, Gozo Party.

Author's Bio-Note:

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The Gozo Party

1947-1950

The Second World War brought about changes into the political, demographic, social and economic spheres to different extents. In 1945 a National Assembly was set up to draft a new Constitution and present it to Sir Harold MacMichael, the British delegate sent to Malta for this specific purpose. A new Constitution was in effect granted by Letters Patent on 5th September 1947.¹

The Foundation of the Gozo Party

During this period an innovative idea, driven by necessity as much as by a strong will, was germinating in the minds of some leading Gozitans. With preparations for the granting of a new Constitution underway, a general election was the logical consequence. The mastermind behind this idea was a leading lawyer from Victoria – Dr Francesco Masini. It was during a meeting held with George Pisani – a teacher, civil servant and writer - and Dr Anton Tabone - the Chief Medical Doctor at the Gozo Hospital - that Masini aired

¹ Joseph Bezzina, *Francesco Masini Founder of the Gozo Party (1894-1964)*, (Gaulitana, Victoria, 1995), 25,27. See also J.J. Cremona, *The Maltese Constitution and Constitutional History Since 1813*, 3rd edition, (Dom Communications, Malta, 2016), 39-49.

the idea of setting up a Gozo Party to candidate itself solely on the Gozo electoral district.²

On 1st April 1947 a correspondent on *Il-Berqa* reported that he had heard about the intention of Dr Francesco Masini and Prof. Paolo Grima - the Principal of the Gozo Central Hospital - to establish a Gozo Party.³ The latter however was not really part of the plan and rebutted this claim a week later on 8th April.⁴ This reference to the Gozo Party idea initiated a local debate about the matter, mainly through newspaper letters to the editor and opinion pieces. *The Times of Malta* of 15th April 1947 announced the composition of the Gozo Party Executive Committee, selected during a meeting held at the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel in Victoria on 12th April. Dr Masini was to be the President together with Luigi Cutajar – Secretary, Dr Antonio Calleja – Assistant Secretary, Carmelo Attard – Treasurer, and Giuseppe Cefai, Dr Giuseppe Cauchi, Dr Giuseppe Galea, Dr Carmelo Galea, Paolo Portelli and Dr Giuseppe Refalo – members.⁵ This Executive Committee was overhauled following the General Election.

A demographic outreach intended by the party founders can be clearly mapped from these first executive members, being recruited from all over Gozo, especially from the largest voting towns like Nadur and Xagħra, besides the main city of Victoria. The new executive committee immediately invested its energy towards making itself heard and counted, both with its prospective electorate, but also on a national scale. One of the first initiatives launched by the new party was its official organ called *Leñen*

² Bezzina (1995), 27.

³ *Il-Berqa*, 1 April 1947, 7.

⁴ He stated that he was a pensioner and re-employed with the consequence that he was unable to take an active role in politics. Ibid. 8 April 1947, 4.

⁵ *The Times of Malta*, 15 April 1947, 7.

Għawdex. It was first issued on 28th June 1947 with Dr Antonio Calleja as its editor and sold at two pence per copy.⁶ This first issue outlined the main reason for the very existence of a Gozo Party, namely, that of addressing the neglected and forgotten island of Gozo. Giuseppe Cefai wrote that Gozo was indeed neglected by the Crown Colony Government of the Islands and was thus in a state of misery. The ‘salvation’ of Gozo had to come from the Gozitans themselves whose rights were denied and were now standing ground to fight for them. Gozo needed Gozitan members of Parliament and not Maltese representatives who were prone to be out of touch with the situation of the island and its people.⁷

Despite its efforts at conveying the Gozo Party’s usefulness for the Gozitan cause, reactions towards the formation of the Party from across the board varied in their stance and evaluation, largely depending on the agenda and biases of whoever was passing judgement. Some were not so sympathetic with the idea. The Nationalist Party raised its eyebrows, and this was quite understandable bearing in mind the widespread support it enjoyed on the island which was now in danger to be lost in favour of this new Party. Some of the Gozo Party’s members were indeed Nationalist supporters at heart, including Masini himself. Immediately after words of the foundation of this new party emerged, Dr Enrico Mizzi, leader of the Nationalist Party, wrote a letter to Dr Masini suggesting a meeting ‘for a sharing of ideas on the actual situation, especially that which regards Gozo.’⁸

Mabel Strickland was cautious and in a rather utilitarian vein wrote that ‘whether the formation of a “Gozo Party” as such is a

⁶ Joseph Bezzina, *Gozo’s Government: The Autonomy of an Island Through History*, (Local Councils Association – Gaultitana, Victoria, 2005), 73.

⁷ *Leġen Għawdex*, 28 June 1947, 1,4.

⁸ Enrico Mizzi to Francesco Masini, 17 April 1947, *Franco Masini Papers*.

wise move towards promoting the greatest good of the greatest number of the inhabitants of both Island remains to be seen.' Her prediction - namely that should one of the major political parties garner a very narrow seat majority, the Gozo Party would be in a powerful position - was indeed prophetic and would in fact become a reality a few months later.⁹ Some reactions were harsher. Street banners were put up in Gozo, describing the Gozo Party as the 'selfish party' because it egoistically intended to carve for itself all the Gozitan seats in parliament.¹⁰ A leader on *The Bulletin* ran: 'Gozo Party Move as Insular Selfishness.'¹¹

The efforts of the Executive Committee however were about to be put to the test as the General Election was looming and the Party was drafting its Electoral Manifesto and selecting the candidates to appear on the ballot sheet.

The Gozo Party Electoral Campaign and the 1947 General Election

Further to the setting up of the party organ *Leĥen Għawdex*, the newly formed Gozo Party employed another strategy to effectively reach the electorate during the campaign that ensued, namely meetings in different areas around Gozo.

The first Gozo Party meeting was held in a garage in Church Street, Għarb on 15th June 1947 and was addressed by party leader Francesco Masini, together with Antonio Calleja, Giuseppe Cefai

⁹ Mabel Strickland accused the Gozitans of having a short memory when they claimed that Gozo was neglected. She stated that Gozo was not neglected when her father, Lord Gerald Strickland, was member for Gozo and Prime Minister of Malta. *The Times of Malta*, 21 April 1947, 4.

¹⁰ *Leĥen Għawdex*, 28 June 1947, 3.

¹¹ *The Bulletin*, 17 April 1947, 1.

and Pino Zammit. A circa 250 crowd attended¹² and according to what Luigi Cutajar wrote on *Il-Berqa*, the village people came out of their houses to greet the Party officials who after the meeting left to the nearby village of San Lawrenz where they found another welcome. During this meeting the intentions of the Gozo Party were made manifest by the leader himself. Masini stated that although the Gozo Party can never be the sole party in government, the latter may hold the governing party in power.¹³ This was somewhat prophetic to what eventually took place later in 1950.

Between June and August, similar meetings were held in Żebbuġ, Għasri, Qala, Ta' Kercem, Ta' Sannat and other places.¹⁴ These meetings generally followed the same pattern: an address by the Party officials, followed by informal discussions with the present crowd. Sometimes, these gatherings took place during or close to the village feast. The one in Qala was held on Sunday 10th August and it was reported that the party officials attended mass before they started the meeting.¹⁵ The meeting held in Xagħra on 28th September was disrupted by opponents, but the situation was eventually brought under control.¹⁶

It is understandable that a meeting of significance be held in Victoria, precisely, in *it-Tokk*.¹⁷ The meeting started at 8.15am of Sunday, 31st August 1947. According to the *Leġen Għawdex* report, Gozitans started gathering on site from early morning. The meeting was opened by Antonio Calleja who introduced

¹² Zammit was an immigrant farmer from the United States of America who supported the Gozo Party. Bezzina (1995), 32.

¹³ *Il-Berqa*, 30 June 1947, 5.

¹⁴ *Leġen Għawdex*, 26 July 1947, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23 August 1947.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4 October 1947, 2.

¹⁷ Today's Independence Square.

Francesco Masini. The leader explained the *raison d'être* of the Gozo Party. Barely had he started when someone shouted a bomb threat. This was followed by a smoke bomb thrown amid the crowd. The situation was brought under control without delay.¹⁸ *The Bulletin* however reported the incident in a different way. It stated that 'pandemonium reigned for nearly fifteen minutes,' shopkeepers closed their establishments and it was through the intervention of Police Assistant Commissioner A. Grech that order was restored and several people were arrested.¹⁹ *Leĥen Għawdex* was critical of this report and alleged that *The Bulletin* editor has a 'fertile imagination' and that he should resort to writing novels instead of news reports.²⁰ This disruption seems to have been sparked by supporters of the Jones party. Four of them were in fact detained by the Police.²¹ When the meeting continued, Masini outlined the three principles on which the Gozo Party was founded, and which were guiding the build-up towards the electoral campaign.

The first was that of improving the well-being of Gozo and the Gozitans. Secondly, the party promised collaboration: the Gozo Party would be willing to cooperate with the party in Government if Gozo's interests were met. Thirdly, independence: despite the previous premise, the Gozo Party will remain an independent party.

Antonio Calleja highlighted the shortcomings of the 1939 MacDonald Constitution and the need for a new Constitution, while Giuseppe Cauchi explained how Great Britain was in a crisis itself and that responsibility must be assumed after the

¹⁸ Ibid., 6 September 1947, 1.

¹⁹ *The Bulletin*, 2 September 1947, 1.

²⁰ *Leĥen Għawdex*, 8 September 1947, 1.

²¹ Bezzina (1995), 33.

elections. Finally, Paolo Portelli pleaded the attendees to choose the candidates who would be most beneficial for the country and Giuseppe Cefai concluded the meeting by outlining the success of the event, despite the adversity during its first part.²²

These meetings were being organised amid a heated electoral campaign, eagerly contested by other parties. The local adversary to the Gozo Party was the Jones Party. Henry Jones, who had served as an independent Member of the Council of Government from 1945 onwards, had founded his own party after disagreements with the Malta Labour Party and the Democratic Action Party.²³ He was a popular character in Gozo and held some considerable support from the farmers, himself being president of the Farmers' Co-operative. The Gozo Party attacked Jones for distributing bran to earn votes.²⁴

The Eighth District was contested by other parties, namely the Labour Party, the Nationalist Party and the Democratic Action Party. The Nationalist Party had deep roots in Gozo although its position was considerably weakened during World War II. It was perceived that the Gozo Party was eating from the Nationalist Party's support in Gozo. This was not received well by the leader Enrico Mizzi who wrote that 'my adversaries had the chance to begin their electoral campaign months before I did' while his campaign in Gozo was very limited.²⁵ It was a fact that Masini himself was previously a supporter of Enrico Mizzi and the Nationalist Party, a point of tension between both from this

²² *Leĥen Għawdex*, 6 September 1947, 1.

²³ J.M. Pirota, *Fortress Colony: The Final Act 1945-1964*, Vol. I (Malta, 1987), 92-93.

²⁴ Franco Masini interview, in Daniel Meilak, 'The Gozo Party (1947-1950),' Unpublished Dissertation, University of Malta, 2009, 107. See also: *Leĥen Għawdex*, 26 July 1947, 1-2. *Ibid.*, 4 October 1947, 1.

²⁵ *Patria!*, 8 November 1947, 3.

point onwards. The 1947 election results later showed that both the Labour Party and the Democratic Action Party were not in a stronger position to garner seats on the Eighth District. There were rumours circulating just weeks before the election that the Gozo Party was colluding with the Labour Party. Should the latter achieve a mandate to govern, the Gozo Party would support it and in return hold the Ministry for Agriculture,²⁶ a demand which was also put forward by Henry Jones.²⁷ This allegation was denied by the Gozo Party.²⁸

The electoral programme of the Gozo Party was launched on 4th October 1947 on the front page of *Leĥen Għawdex*. It was sub-divided into five pillars. The first pertained to a declaration, typically sourced from a relatively conservative community from where the party was intending to tally its votes: a vouch for the protection of the Roman Apostolic Catholic Religion as the religion of Malta. The second outlined the aim of the party to protect Gozo's interests, albeit recognising that the national interests take priority over the interests of the minority. Despite remaining an independent party, the latter would pledge support to the Government if Gozo's interests were duly considered.

The third pillar focused on several priorities. With regards to agriculture the party promised support to local farmers and the introduction of a veterinary doctor service in Gozo. There was also a promise to assist in the improvement of local industries, such as milk production, fishing, winemaking and lacemaking. Additionally, when it comes to the education field, the Party would work to establish an elementary school in each village,

²⁶ *Il-Berqa*, 29 September 1947, 5.

²⁷ Pirota (1987), 92-93.

²⁸ *Il-Berqa*, 1 October 1947, 4.

that Gozitan schools teach the same subjects being taught in Malta, and work to establish a technical school in Gozo. Due to the post-war economic hardships, the Party would also work on schemes to assist young people to emigrate. Finally, the Party would lobby for the improvement of the electricity, water and telephone services, the health system and repairs on roads.

Social legislation formed the fourth pillar. The Gozo Party was conceived on the lines of the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* by Pope Pius XI (1931). This would effectively bring forward the principles of solidarity, social welfare and improve the employer-employee relationship. The fifth pillar concerned financial legislation. The Party would work to improve the economy according to the contemporary situation of the colony.²⁹

The General Election took place on the 25th, 26th and 27th October 1947. The Gozo Party presented seven candidates for the eighth district which comprised Gozo and Comino. The Jones Party presented five, the Labour Party and Nationalist Party two candidates each, another for the Democratic Action Party and an independent candidate. Despite some incidents in the final days before the election and on the election days themselves, the process took place as planned. The Gozo Party elected three out of five candidates on the eighth district. These were Francesco Masini (1597 votes), Antonio Calleja (1549 votes) and Giuseppe Cefai (1432 votes). The Jones Party managed to secure the remaining two seats with Henry Jones (3378 votes), who got the highest number of votes by far and Francesco Camilleri (1558 votes). The country was to be led by a Labour Government under the Premiership of Paolo Boffa and a Nationalist Party Opposition

²⁹ *Leĥen Għawdex*, 4 October 1947, 1.

headed by Enrico Mizzi.³⁰ Although the Labour Party secured a comfortable majority, it remained to be seen who the smaller parties were going to support in the immediate and long-term future during the legislature. With the election results in hand, the Legislative Assembly was then able to start functioning and put the new MacMichael Constitution to the test.

The Gozo Party in the Legislative Assembly (First Phase: 1947-1948)

The first recorded speech of a Gozo Party member in the new Legislative Assembly was delivered in the third sitting on 11th November 1947. Francesco Masini showed support for a motion presented by the Labour government to express loyalty towards the sovereign of Malta King George VI.³¹ Besides voting in the Assembly, from time-to-time the Gozo Party members raised issues of interest to Gozo. On 26th December Joseph Cefai lamented the state of the Gozo ferry, to which Giorgio Borg Olivier replied that since the ferry operator was a Gozo Party Executive member, they should persuade him to make the necessary improvements.³² Cefai also earmarked the unavailability of electricity services in Gozo after 7.30am and the lack of teachers in the Gozo Lyceum.³³

When in the beginning of 1948 the Governor of Malta Sir Francis Douglas delivered the Speech from the Throne, Francesco Masini spoke about how Gozo was the 'forgotten isle' and eagerly

³⁰ M. J. Schiavone, *L-Elezzjonijiet f'Malta 1849-1992: Storja Fatti Ċifri*, (Pietà, 1992), 177-185.

³¹ *Debates of the Legislative Assembly*, 11 November 1947, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 327-329.

³³ *Ibid.*

pleaded the Government to deliver his promise of appointing a Commission to report on the condition of Gozo and make recommendations to the Government.³⁴

During the ensuing months, the Gozo Party voted alongside the Government. This drew harsh criticism from the Nationalist side³⁵ and some of the press.³⁶ Despite this show of support, there were issues sparking disagreement. A case in point was the annexation of the Gozo Library to that of Malta in the Financial Estimates. This annexation was to come into effect on the 16th August 1948. The Gozo Party disagreed with this move and argued that since its foundation in 1837, the library always maintained its independence and should be left so.³⁷

Another issue emanating from the General Estimates of 1948 was the taxation reform being proposed, which included the Succession and Donation Bill and the Income Tax Bill. The Gozo Party voted in favour of raising taxes as outlined in the former and in favour of the introduction of the latter. The Nationalist Party opposed such moves by the Labour Government.³⁸ The Gozo Party also pushed for a public inquiry to be held on the tragedy of 30th October 1948 when a passenger ferry capsized near il-Ħaġra taċ-Ċawl in Qala - Gozo with loss of life.³⁹ Francesco Masini was appointed as one of the members of an ad hoc committee to raise funds for the victims' families.⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibid., 2 February 1948, 75.

³⁵ Ibid., 6 February 1948, 188.

³⁶ See for instance *Il-Berqa*, 23 February 1948, 7.

³⁷ *Debates*, 16 June 1948, 1941-2.

³⁸ Ibid., 15 October 1948, 3064-3067.

³⁹ Ibid., 3 November 1948, 3351-3353.

⁴⁰ Bezzina (1995), 46.

One of the more significant achievements during this period was the setting up of a Commission to report on the state of Gozo as proposed in the Speech from the Throne. It was composed of Edgar G. Montanaro – Commissioner for Gozo as Chairman, Francesco Masini, Henry Jones, Rev. Accursius Xerri, and Louis Cassola who acted as secretary. This move was welcomed by many, including the Diocese of Gozo⁴¹ and the Gozitan-based political parties. All three bodies had a direct representative in this Commission which held its first sitting on 19th August 1948.⁴² *The Times of Malta* accused the government - especially Head of Ministry Paolo Boffa - of repeatedly using the Gozo Commission as an excuse to delay any needed works or projects in Gozo.⁴³

On 19th July 1949, after thirty-eight sittings, the Gozo Commission concluded its work, and the final report was presented to the Government. The report opened with an analysis of the agriculture sector in Gozo. It proposed the building of dams in valleys for the collection of rainwater, more threshing machines, more agriculture experts to provide better advice for modernisation. For the fishing sector, the Commission noted that the industry was using old and obsolete methods and experts in the field were also needed. Slipways and infrastructure used by fishermen needed upgrades and repairs.

Education was another challenging sector. The Commission recommended the construction of new schools and assistance to teachers to reach all village schools. Gozo suffered from insularity, and this could be overcome by organising more excursions and trips for students and teachers to Malta. The Gozitan school

⁴¹ Ibid., 2 February 1948, 75.

⁴² Ibid., 6 February 1948, 188.

⁴³ See for instance *Il-Berqa*, 23 February 1948, 7.

children were not treated like their counterparts in Malta and were not receiving cod-liver oil, milk and other nutritional aliments. Likewise, some courses offered in Malta were not being offered in Gozo and there was no technical school on the island.

The Mġarr harbour needed repairs and upgrades and a suitable landing at Ċirkewwa to compliment that of Marfa was being proposed. The Gozo-Malta ferry service needed a new timetable to perform better. The Department of Public Works lacked the presence of an engineer, and the situation of several streets was appalling. The number of buses and trips in Gozo was insufficient and most villages hardly had a service worthy of the name. The Commission proposed the appointment of a Traffic Board to oversee changes in this regard. Additionally, water services needed upgrades, and the electricity supply needed to cater for a more-widespread demand and offered also during the day.

The report outlines proposals for the building of a town hall to house all Government Departments, new houses to accommodate Government officials residing in Gozo, the opening of a Gozo Museum at the Citadel, upgrades to Victoria's two cinemas, the promotion of the lace industry, the opening of a passport office in Gozo and the possibility of subsidizing band clubs.

When it came to law and order, the Commission noted that the Gozo Courts premises were inadequate, the staff overburdened, the Police presence was inadequate and lacking several necessities. Veterinary services were lacking, and a veterinary surgeon was urgently needed, together with upgrades in the slaughter-house facilities.

Noting the high level of unemployment, there were suggestions to organise an information campaign about prospective countries being considered by several Gozitans. Within the medical sector,

a much-needed modernization of the Victoria Hospital and the improvement in the District Medical service were being proposed.

Finally, the responsibilities of the Commissioner for Gozo were never clearly defined, and the Commission proposed that 'the only alternative is that of the appointment of a Minister for Gozo.'⁴⁴

The Government thanked the Commission for its work,⁴⁵ but there was the risk of having the report side-lined without ever being implemented.⁴⁶ The Gozo Commission was the last important issue over which the Gozo Party had a degree of influence in the year 1948. The first months of 1949 were mostly spent in anticipation of the Gozo Commission report which was presented in July of the same year.

The Gozo Party in the Legislative Assembly (Second Phase: 1949-1950)

The year 1949 opened with a show of support from the Maltese Legislative Assembly towards Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, Catholic Primate of Hungary who was imprisoned for openly criticising the Communist government and promoting Catholic teachings. The Assembly joined Pope Pius XII and the United Nations in condemning this imprisonment and torture during a sitting held on 13th January.⁴⁷

The Gozo Party raised two issues. The first concerned the lack of electricity supply, and a new power station in Gozo

⁴⁴ *The Report of the Government's Commission set up to Inquire and Report in the Requirements of the Island of Gozo*, 26 July 1949, NAG 01/05.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Għawdex*, 14 August 1949, 2.

⁴⁷ *Debates*, 13 January 1949, 3981-3982.

was proposed. The other was the miserable state of the Gozo football ground. Enters the scene Dom Mintoff, Minister of Works and Reconstruction at the time. He stated that the Gozo Commission has already analysed the situation on the island and that the Gozitans cannot be trusted. When other issues, such as improvement in the police force and the lace industry were highlighted, the Gozitan Members received the reply that they should wait for the Commission report to be concluded.⁴⁸

Antonio Calleja on behalf of the Gozo Party spoke about several aspects during his reply to the Speech from the Throne on 4th March 1949. One was the question of whether Malta's electoral system should continue using the proportional system or else adopt the *scrutine des listes* or perhaps the single member system. The second was an appeal to the Minister of Health to study the implications of the National Health Insurance before a decision to introduce it is effectively taken.

Reform was needed in the Education system as well as several improvements within the Courts of Justice and the Press Law. He also showed his concern to the fact that Gozo was not referred to directly during the Speech, again with the excuse of the Commission. Cefai and Masini took the argument further. Masini was not happy with Government interference in the work of the Commission and the excuse to delay the start of new projects and initiatives because of the Commission not having concluded its report so far.⁴⁹ This argument was a warning for the relationship between the Gozo Party and the Labour Government. During this period, the Gozo Party largely voted against Boffa's government.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 4019-4022.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4 March 1949, 140-148.

The situation took a turn later in 1949 when the Labour Party, who was the Party in government, suffered a major internal crisis. In September of that year Mintoff clashed with Boffa with the result that the Labour Party split into two factions, with Mintoff garnering some considerable support, and Boffa remaining in power with whatever was left.⁵⁰ Mintoff accused Boffa of trying to buy off the Gozo Party members' support. Masini however still leaned towards the Boffa government, despite previous moments of disagreements.

The Gozo Party also supported initiatives proposed by other parties. One such proposal was put forward by Henry Jones. Jones had been contacted by two British gentlemen who ran a civil dockyard in Southampton. The idea was to construct a dockyard facility in Gozo with the total expense of £200,000. This meant some considerable investment in Gozo, the creation of jobs and putting the island directly on the Mediterranean shipping routes. However, the project never materialised, partly because the Maltese government was in no position to invest £100,000 (or half of the total expense as required) and grant the enterprise a ten-year tax break.⁵¹ *Il-Berqa* questioned the real motive behind this: was it the lack of funds, or indifference towards Gozo?⁵² It may well have been both.

Matters were more complicated when it came to the *Gozo Banca Giuratale* issue. At the dawn of 1950, a discussion took place as to whether this iconic building at the heart of Gozo's city Victoria should be demolished to make space. Masini was

⁵⁰ Mario Cutajar, *Storja tal-Partit Laburista*, 2nd edition, (Sensiela Kotba Soċjalisti, Malta, 2011), 127-130.

⁵¹ *Debates*, 14 November 1949, 2154-2168.

⁵² *Il-Berqa*, 20 December 1949, 7.

certainly in favour of this project. He compared this idea to similar moves made by Mussolini who demolished old buildings in Rome to make space and beautify the city. Not everyone was impressed by this argument.⁵³ George Borg Olivier insisted that since the Diocese of Gozo wanted the statue of Christ the King (or the war monument) in the middle of the square, there would be no space for the Leone Philharmonic Society to put up the band platform for the feast of the Assumption. The *Banca's* space would be free to use in this regard.⁵⁴

Enrico Mizzi alleged that proprietors of sites in Savina Square would also benefit from the *Banca's* demolition.⁵⁵ *The Times of Malta* insisted that should this project materialise, 'it-Tokk [will turn] into a slum-like square'.⁵⁶ Despite this, the Gozo Party through its newspaper *Għawdex* continued to promote this project throughout. Doubts were also raised as to whether the Antiquities Committee was ever consulted on the matter.⁵⁷ Finally, the Diocese of Gozo was quoted as being in favour of the *Banca's* demolition for the comfort of the people and for the war monument to be placed in its vacated space, although the veracity of this statement remains dubious considering that it was reported in *Għawdex*.⁵⁸ The project remained ink on paper and never materialised. The *Banca Giuratale*, constructed in 1733 and modified in 1875, remains a standing testimony to the island's administrative history in the past centuries.

⁵³ *Debates*, 22 February 1950, 3155.

⁵⁴ Bezzina (1995), 53.

⁵⁵ *Debates*, 22 February 1950, 3155.

⁵⁶ *The Times of Malta*, 28 February 1950, 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* See also: *Debates*, 22 February 1950, 3150-3151. *Il-Patria!*, 4 March 1950, 3.

⁵⁸ *Għawdex*, 12 March 1950, 2-3.

Between June 1948 and September 1949, the Gozo Party generally adopted an 'anti-Labour stance'.⁵⁹ The Boffa Government was however in deep trouble following the Party's split in 1949. Since the Government was struggling to maintain a governing majority, the Gozo Party was now likely to be the make-or-break factor. *Il-Berqa* wrote that '...when the Labour Party was weakened, the Gozo Party instantly lent its hand to keep it in power...'⁶⁰ The Government was metaphorically held at ransom by the Gozo Party: either Gozo's interests or demands are met, or the government majority is jeopardized.

Taking the financial vote for Gozo throughout the legislature as a measuring tool, a clear picture emerges. For the financial year 1946-1947 (before the legislature) the vote for Gozo stood at £36,000. Gozo was voted £7,000 for the financial year 1948-1949, drastically less than before. But in 1949, the Government budgeted a total of £82,325 for the financial year 1950-1951. The situation was clear. The Gozo Party was getting what it wanted, thanks to the situation in which the Boffa government presently was.

Attacks by the opposition were frequent. The Gozo Party was accused of blackmailing the government by the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party.⁶¹ *The Bullettin* wrote that the Gozitans were grabbing as much as they can, whether the Maltese government coffer can afford this or not.⁶²

The Gozo Party however was not without its difficulties. News on *Il-Berqa* of 6th June 1950 reported that Giuseppe

⁵⁹ P.S. Portelli, 'In Search for Local Autonomy in Post-War Gozo 1947-1961', Unpublished Dissertation, University of Malta, 2006, 53-54.

⁶⁰ *Il-Berqa*, 28 February 1950, 7. See also *The Times of Malta*, 28 February 1950, 7.

⁶¹ See also *Il Patria*, 17 December 1949, 1.

⁶² *The Bullettin*, 1 July 1950, 3.

Cefai had resigned from the party (as a matter of fact he had resigned before 4th June when his resignation was presented to the Party Executive) albeit staying on as a Member of the Legislative Assembly. Cefai intended to continue supporting the Boffa government.⁶³ Reasons for this resignation were not provided. Later he refused allegations of having joined the Boffa administration.⁶⁴ In the long run, this refusal held no water because eventually he chose to run with Boffa's Malta Workers' Party for the 1950 election.⁶⁵

In May 1950, the Government presented its financial estimates, from which Gozo was carving the sum of £82,325. However, the relationship between the Boffa government and the Gozo Party was becoming increasingly tense. The event that most highlights this tension concerned the Victoria Hospital issue. There was a heated disagreement over who should take the post of Cook. Boffa himself claimed that the Gozo Party was not supporting his government because of this disagreement.⁶⁶ However, it seems that the Gozo Party was also feeling that the government was not heeding to the Gozitan pleas.⁶⁷ On 6th June 1950 the Legislative Assembly resolved itself into a Committee of Supply to consider the General Estimates of 1950-1951. The motion was defeated by twenty-one votes to eighteen. The House adjourned *sine die*.⁶⁸ The Gozo Party had voted against Boffa's government and got its fair share of criticism. Masini was even contacted by Archbishop Michael Gonzi to persuade him to vote with the government to keep it in place. Gonzi knew perfectly well

⁶³ *Il-Berqa*, 6 June 1950, 1.

⁶⁴ *The Times of Malta*, 9 June 1950, 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Pirota (1987), 195,197.

⁶⁷ Masini interview, 104.

⁶⁸ Pirota (1987), 198.

what the alternative could hold: Mintoff's Labour Party. Masini was also approached by Governor Sir Gerald Creasy.⁶⁹ The Gozo Party was defiant and stubborn in its stance. On 23rd June 1950 Governor Creasy dissolved the Legislative Assembly.⁷⁰

The dissolution of the Legislative Assembly brought about the sudden disintegration of the Gozo Party. It was somehow unexpected, considering that some time before Masini had hinted at running again for the next General Election and possibly achieve a better result.⁷¹ Masini and Calleja, the only two remaining Members of the Legislative Assembly following Cefai's resignation, did not contest the 1950 General Election that was held in September and won by the Nationalist Party who garnered the support of the Malta Workers' Party to form a coalition government under the leadership of Prime Minister Enrico Mizzi.

The Aftermath

The Gozo Party's demise came as abrupt as its emergence. Joseph Bezzina puts parts of the blame of the Party's disintegration on the fact that it was a heterogeneous group, that is, members originated from different backgrounds and held different interests.⁷² The three-year test in the Maltese Legislative Assembly managed to bring all these to the fore, with the consequence being an inevitable rift.

The end of the 1947 Legislative Assembly left the Gozitan electorate in a state of frustration and confusion. The Gozo

⁶⁹ Masini interview, 105.

⁷⁰ Bezzina (1995), 50.

⁷¹ *Debates*, 17 February 1950, 3048.

⁷² Bezzina (2005), 75.

Party was no more, and the Jones party was severely weakened. In the 1950 General Election, the Gozitan electorate elected five members from five different parties: Enrico Mizzi (Nationalist Party), Amabile Cauchi (Malta Workers' Party), Paul Portelli (Democratic Action Party), Cecilia de Trafford Strickland (Constitutional Party) and Joseph Cefai (Independent). Joseph Cefai's resignation in June 1950 was the manifestation of this internal strife. The Gozo Party was also aware that it could never be able to solely constitute the colony's government, as it only represented one district. When it was vested with power, that is, keeping Boffa's government in place, this was too much to bear because a party which aligned itself to one faction naturally drew suspicions, criticism or even opposition from other parties and factions and had no guarantee of getting all its demands met.

Despite its short span of time, the Gozo Party, having brought Gozo to the forefront of the national agenda, was an unprecedented experiment which to this date has not been emulated. It has however been taken into consideration. That it demonstrated strength in unity and self-determination by the Gozitans for the Gozitans was probably one of the most long-lasting legacies of the party. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the first Civic Council was held in Xewkija in 1952 and subsequently the Gozo Civic Council to manage Gozo's affairs forming in 1958 on the initiative of Dr Anton Tabone who also happens to be Dr Francesco Masini's cousin.⁷³

The story of the Gozo Party may only be one of several attempts at addressing Gozo's interests taking place in the fast-changing world of the twentieth century, which culminated in the

⁷³ Bezzina, 2005, 78-85.

establishment of the Ministry for Gozo, created by a Nationalist government in 1987, which albeit having its own limitations has served the interests of Gozo for thirty-seven years (although this remit was demoted to Parliamentary Secretary by the 1996-1998 Labour government). Into the twenty-first century, in a more fast-changing world which resonates even into the remotest corners of Gozo, citizens and politicians alike will need to adjust according to the signs of the times whether decentralising or tightening the rope when it comes to the affairs of Gozo. What the Gozo Party still reverberates since its first issue of *Leħen Għawdex* on 28th June 1947 – that the salvation of Gozo must come from the Gozitans themselves⁷⁴ - still echoes in our times and needs to be the point of departure for a serious reflection.

⁷⁴ *Leħen Għawdex*, 28 June 1947, 1,4.

The Monte di Pietà in Gozo 1910-1939: A Social Perspective

The Clients of the Monte Part 2

Pauline Vella

Abstract:

After exploring the *Monte*'s inception and *raison d'être* together with the administrative aspect and perspective, in Part One of this article, the research moves on to its more important issue: that of the actual clients of the *Monte* and tries to understand the how and why of its usage.

The clients were mostly lower-class females, poor but not destitute, who owned some collateral they could afford to pawn to help them in a financially dire situation. The research explores the *de jure* and *de facto* roles of these females and their position within a paternalistic and patriarchal society.

Keywords:

Monte di Pietà, Pawning, Women history, Role of women in the family, Gozo.

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The Monte di Pietà in Gozo 1910-1939: A Social Perspective

The Clients of the Monte Part 2

The Clients of the *Monte di Pietà* – who were they?

In part one of this two-part article, the *Monte*'s religious origin and charitable purpose tailored for the Maltese and Gozitan society were discussed. It was argued that the *Monte* was paternalistic in attitude, emulating the colonial government under which it operated and which in turn responded to the expectancies of a people used to a paternalistic form of government.¹ Roman Catholicism played an important part in the setting of the patriarchal social scenario which shaped the daily life of the Maltese people at large.² In turn,

¹ J. Chircop, 'Public Health and Poor Relief in the British Mediterranean Colonial Context (1800s-1860s)', Compostela Group of Universities, Czech Republic, 2004, 307

² A. Koster, *Prelates and Politicians in Malta: changing power balances between church and state in a Mediterranean island fortress (1800-1976)*, (Netherlands, 1984), in passim & 'Regular and Secular Clergy in British Malta', in V. Mallia-Milanes ed., *The British Colonial Experience 1800-1964: The Impact on Maltese Society* (Malta, 1988), 79-90; J. Bezzina, *Religion and Politics in a Crown Colony - The Gozo-Malta Story 1798-1864*, (Malta, 1985), in passim; Chircop, (2004), 302; Bowen-Jones et al, *Malta - Background for Development*, (Malta, 1960), 180; D. Gregory, *Malta, Britain and the European Powers 1793-1815*, (New Jersey 1996), 245-255.

patriarchal society controlled marriage and kept most of the women within the domestic sphere.³ The *Monte's* main clients were females concerned with drawing extra credit to fulfil their economic needs. This institution classified its female clients either as *daughters*, *wives* or *widows* while it classified its male clients only as *sons* and not as subjective husbands or widowers.⁴ Still, in Gozo, the *Monte di Pietà* remained a charitable institution with the bulk of its clientele being common women living in an agrarian society plagued with poverty and hence with little savings to fall on to when in need of cash.

The fact that women turned to the *Monte di Pietà*, shows a degree of independence on their part when it came to decisions regarding the household budget and the administration of their often-meagre dowry.⁵ Indeed, the objects pawned give an idea of the type of *Monte* client while the amounts such clients required suggest the way of life they led.

Gozitan rural women had little opportunity of finding work outside their domestic-field boundaries. Some helped in the fields while others manufactured lace items.⁶ Their agricultural work was seasonal, while lacework was already suffering from a long drawn out demise.⁷ It completely died out, as a relatively well paid occupation, between the wars due to the world financial crisis and also since a much cheaper machine-made alternative

³ J. Boissevain, 'Some Notes on the Position of Women in Maltese Society', (1967) in K. Weibust (ed.) *Kulturvariation i Sydeuropa NEFA Forlag*, Copenhagen, 197-213.

⁴ Data taken from Monte tickets researched. See Figure 2 and Table 1 in Appendix 1.

⁵ J. Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, (UK 1993), 241.

⁶ 1912 *Royal Commission Minutes of Evidence* (henceforth 1912 *RCME*), 251-2; also, Oral History interview 2 with Lorenza Cremona from Qala, found in Appendix 2 found in original thesis which is too long to be reproduced here.

⁷ 1912 *RCME*, 249.

became available as early as 1911.⁸ Both agricultural work and lacemaking left very little profit and hence supplementary cash was required.⁹ A third possible occupation in the cotton industry, which had employed whole families, had also experienced a process of decline throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The decline and extinction of the cotton manufacture and of lacemaking can be taken as an example of how imperial control extinguished indigenous manufacture and left many female workers unemployed.¹¹ This in itself pushed women to the *Monte di Pietà* more inevitably than before.

Another possible and acceptable occupation was that of seamstress.¹² In theory, the draperies entrusted or the finished

⁸ Ibid; *Censuses 1901 & 1931*, Occupations, 58-66. In 1901 lace making employed 5,312 Gozitans and 193 Maltese. By 1931 the number had dwindled to a mere 1,893 Gozitans and 39 Maltese; *MGG Sup XCV ActXXI of 1927 To Protect the Lace Industry 1/7/1927*. In 1927 an Act was passed to protect the lace industry, but it was a case of too little, too late. *Official Debates of the Legislative Assembly of Malta* (henceforth *ORDLAM*), Vol.I, 3493; Vol.IV, 392-5. Today the very few people who work lace do it for the tourist industry and at times the product is of rather inferior quality. However, there have been attempts at a revival and a lace cooperative has been established by a Gozitan, Ms Consiglia Azzopardi who is currently reading for her Ph.D. in lace studies and who has published books on lacework.

⁹ 1912 *RCME*, 248-9.

¹⁰ 1931 *Census*, xxxii. In 1931 there were 86 cotton spinners and 95 weavers in the Maltese Islands as compared to 782 and 1,272 respectively in 1901 and 9,753 and 4,693 in 1851.

¹¹ J. Chircop, 'Maltese Cotton Manufacture Under British Imperial Rule', in *Bank of Valletta Review*, 15, (Spring 1997), 47-5.

¹² 1931 *Census*, 50. There were 2,030 Gozitan females under textile and dress in comparison to 2,667 in Malta. This suggests that all work related to textiles including residual cotton-related occupations were lumped under this heading.

product could be pawned for a short period of time.¹³ In other quite rare instances, a woman would open a tiny shop, stock it with a few odd things such as washing soap, tobacco, half a sack of beans and the like, together with a little wine and spirits, with everything being under the value of £10 and perhaps earn around 4d or 6d which would be 'a godsend'¹⁴ and would set her family in a slightly better off position than the rest of the villagers. However, she would have to own capital, or at least part of it, in the first place and that's where the *Monte di Pietà* might have been helpful. The capital could have been painstakingly saved over decades, or it could have been inherited. The woman might also have had some gold given to her as dowry or she might have collected it as special gifts during her lifetime or, more likely, inherited it. This gold she would put to good use by pawning it at the *Monte*. In very few of the cases studied, some clients requested an amount of money less than the value of the gold object being pawned. The Keeper of Pledges would make a note on the actual ticket saying that the client requested the particular amount given.¹⁵ In these few cases, the client asked for the amount she needed, and this points to careful budgeting. Consequently, redemption would be more rapid, and the client would have a lesser amount to repay.

¹³ Silk draperies and clothes could be pledged for 2 years while woollens for 6 months. *Guida Generale di Malta e Gozo*, (Malta, 1899) 137. In Mexico City seamstresses pawned such goods together with sewing machines in difficult times so this might have been a possibility for Gozitan seamstresses too. M.E. Francois, *A Culture of Everyday Credit – Housekeeping, Pawnbroking and Governance in Mexico City 1750-1920*, (USA 2006), passim.

¹⁴ 1912 *RCME*, 152; 1931 *Census*, 50,52,54,58. Forty-one females were occupied as food, drink and tobacco sellers while some 55 were registered as grocers in Gozo. In the census Gozo is represented as one entity whereas the towns and villages of Malta are represented in their own right. It is therefore impossible to say where these people hailed from.

¹⁵ This was quite rare as only five of the 12,342 tickets researched had this request on them.

On the other hand, it was quite frequent for clients to have more than one ticket issued for different gold items pawned on the same day.¹⁶ This was, perhaps done so that the client would redeem at her own convenience, saving money for each different ticket. It could also be that an agent who would be acting on behalf of several clients would need separate tickets. Those women who established themselves as owners of village shops with or without the help of the *Monte di Pietà* could become lenders or pawnbrokers themselves and lend on their own terms.¹⁷ Female clients who frequented these shops for the purpose of pawning were those who lacked any means of transport but not inferior objects to pawn as was the case with corner grocery shop pawning in other countries both in Europe and elsewhere.¹⁸ They simply found it more convenient, though much less secure, than pawning at the *Monte di Pietà* in the town of *Rabat* or *Victoria*.¹⁹

Begging was the only alternative left to those who could not pawn or escape acute poverty in any other way.²⁰ Friday, possibly payday, was the day people from the villages, especially from *Xewkija*, went to beg in the capital town of Victoria where most white collar workers lived.²¹ Poverty is also reflected in the fact that up to the late 1930s, it was still common on both islands

¹⁶ This was quite a frequent course of action especially when clients had quite a few items.

¹⁷ Appendix 2 in original thesis oral history interview 2, Lorenza Cremona, date: 16th Sept. 2008, location: Qala, Gozo.

¹⁸ Ibid; K. Hudson, *Pawnbroking, An Aspect of British Social History*, U.K. 1982, 80 and passim; M.E. Francois, 17, 84-87 and passim.

¹⁹ Ibid; Rabat is the semitic name of the town. This town was re-christened Victoria by the British and though it is officially known by this name, the locals still call it Rabat.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ A. Zammit, 'The Changing Face of Gozo', in *Gozo, Past and Present*, ed. Maurice Cauchi, University of Malta Gozo Centre, Gozo, 2002.26; cf. Appendix 4 oral history interview 3, with Mgr. J. Gauci-Grech, date: 27th Oct. location: Rabat/Victoria, Gozo.

for town and especially country people to go barefoot. Shoes were worn on special occasions and when visiting the capital;²² therefore the common people rarely had more than a pair of shoes and perhaps a pair of sandals while some had even less. The main reason, of course was an economic one but one of the minor reasons could have been that they could not be used as collateral.

Poverty is also reflected in the way clothing that could be used as pawning collateral was managed. The traditional imported black silk *faldetta*, the garb of the peasant woman worn over her clothes when she went to church and on other occasions, was often shared between female household members and neighbours.²³ It was this silk *faldetta* which was usually pawned as the women could do without it until a special occasion arose unlike the everyday cotton one or the *geżwira*. Those who were better off would have a second silk *faldetta*, and therefore, they could pawn the spare one. Furthermore, when the *faldetta* or any other item of clothing went out of fashion, one could pawn it and never redeem it again hence obtaining the money and never having to pay back the amount plus the interest. However, it is not clear if this could be done with clothing as it was possible with jewellery items. During my research, out of the batch of three years' worth of pawning tickets clothing was always redeemed and I never came across clothing which had been sold because

²² C. Cassar, 'Everyday life in Malta in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries' in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed) *The British Colonial Experience 1880-1964: The Impact on Maltese Society*, (Mireva, Malta, 1988), 104.

²³ J. Bezzina, *Religion & Politics in a Crown Colony – The Gozo-Malta story 1798-1864*, (Buġelli Publications, Malta, 1985) 75; G. Lanfranco, *Drawwiet u Tradizzjonijiet Maltin*, (PIN Malta, 2001), 23-33. There was also the cotton *faldetta* or *għonnella* and the everyday 'half-għonnella' or *geżwira* worn by the poor. In between the wars, it went out of fashion with the middle and upper classes as they started to adopt European styles and fashions.

the owner could not or did not redeem. In this case, it is also a question of mentality as such a frugal society was expected to make infinite use of its belongings.



Fig. 5 - Peasant women wearing typical garb and carrying agricultural implements. Note that the women are barefoot. (NAG photo number 766 (30/33).

Photo entitled: *Peasant women posing for photograph at Ta' Ċenċ Area [l/o Sannat, Gozo] c.1914-1916.* Photo by John A. Mizzi.

The items clients could pawn at the *Monte di Pietà*, were cotton, silk and linen draperies and clothes;²⁴ woollen draperies and clothes; brass and bronze; and gold and silver jewellery. The traditional *faldetta*, petticoats, linen and cotton blouses and skirts, sheets, valances, curtains, counterpanes and draperies, all gendered apparel and household items, were the most pawned goods when

²⁴ As a separate category from the other clothes and drapery items.

investigating the clothing pawned.²⁵ Even with these, there were laws to be observed and in times of epidemics the *Monte di Pietà* was advised not to accept any clothing.²⁶ Used clothing and bedding under the value of £2 could be pawned without any interest being levied on it.²⁷ This was a measure to provide the destitute with petty credit too. I have never come upon tickets for pawned brass and bronze.

Pawning peaked during the early 1920s especially in 1920 and 1921 this being the post-World War I period which was characterised by massive unemployment and the rising price of wheat which mostly hit the lower classes these being the main consumers of bread. During this period, therefore, the high prices of basic staples and the insecure nature of employment perpetuated the evident low standard of living of the labouring classes.²⁸ However, the 1912 Commission was later to discover that the vast majority of Gozitans grew their own wheat and other wheat substitutes and baked their own bread thus saving on the rising price of wheat.²⁹ So this was not the problem that caused the exodus recorded in the 1921 Census when the population of Gozo actually decreased.³⁰ The problem in Gozo was due to a vicious circle as lack of unemployment fostered emigration which in turn kept population increase low, drained human resources and hindered economic

²⁵ See List 1 in Appendix 1. There was the occasional male article such as trousers or a *terħa*, a wide and long cloth belt made of cloth usually cotton. Once a female pawned a cassock, perhaps she was the sister or servant of a priest and one of them needed cash. These are the most commonly pawned goods when discussing clothing and draperies as when it comes to jewellery, this was by far the most pawned item compared.

²⁶ NAM MDP 169b, 30/10/1915, no.22.

²⁷ *Ordinanze ed Altri Atti Ufficiali*, vol. XI, Ordinance No. I of 1853, 20.

²⁸ Chircop, 'Brokers, Collectors, Collaborators: Mediating Colonial Modernization in Malta 1870-1914', *Proceedings of History Week 2003*, The Malta Historical Society, Malta, 2005, 2-3.

²⁹ 1912 *RCME*, 247.

³⁰ 1921 *Census*, 6.

development and hence generated further unemployment.³¹ The Colonial government, and later the National Assembly, did nothing to alleviate this situation. Emigration had long been dished out as the only salvation for the population problem of the Maltese Islands³² and precious little more was done except artificially creating employment in public works projects.³³

In Gozo this took the form of road works, the gradual laying out of drainage and the breakwater in Mġarr.³⁴ By comparison, in Malta there were more job opportunities especially for males in the harbour area. Instead of emigrating abroad, some Gozitans migrated to Malta. This migration, however, was not as marked as the governing authorities wished since the 1921 Census attributes the small proportion of Gozitans who migrated to the sister island as a result of the “*conservative character of Gozitans and the lack of easy communication with Malta*”.³⁵ However, necessity increased the number as in the next decade it rose from 656 to 3,223 of whom 3.30% settled in urban districts, 7.31% in suburban and 1.62% in rural districts.³⁶ There was also a demand for Gozitan females to work as maids with the commercial class at their residences in Sliema.³⁷

³¹ Bowen-Jones et al, *Malta-Background for Development*, (Malta, 1960), VI-VII.

³² RWGD 1919-1920, R 14. This Emigration Report states that emigration was taking place ‘*under such difficulties as would dishearten any others but those who are faced with starvation if they remain at home.*’ Reports on the Workings of Government Departments 1910-1940.

³³ D. Fenech, *Responsibility and Power in Inter-war Malta, Book One: Endemic Democracy (1919-1930)*, (PEG Ltd., Malta, 2005)249-269; Reports of the Office of Public Works, various years, RWGD.

³⁴ The former two were a long-drawn process which lasted the period in question while money for the latter was voted in 1901. *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 21 Feb. 1901.

³⁵ 1921 *Census*, 38.

³⁶ 1931 *Census*, xxxvii.

³⁷ NAG PD/1/183, no. 2305; Census 1930, 56, in Gozo alone there were 138 females (compared to 46 males) employed in the domestic service and this was much more than the Gozitan economy could support.

Demographic trends offer background and reasons for pawning activities. In the first decade (1910-1920), the population of the Maltese Islands decreased due to heavy emigration, the upheaval of war (mostly in Malta) and the Spanish Flu epidemic.³⁸ The 1921 Census also records a heavy decrease in the population of Gozo which is attributed to the heavy emigration which took place during the decade to the United States, Canada and Australia and consequently led to the tipping of the balance between the birth and death rate.³⁹ This resulted in a population decrease in seven out of twelve villages in Gozo.⁴⁰ The highest decline in birth being that registered in 1917.⁴¹ In 1931 the situation was described as “*normal [and]...on a level with that recorded in the intercensal period 1901-1911*”.⁴² However, this was also due to the fact that emigrants had returned due to the hardships of the Great Depression.⁴³ In reality, as late as 1958, the population of Gozo had not yet recovered from decline as there were less males than females and there was a higher proportion of people over sixty-five.⁴⁴ Emigration and the higher male infant and senior mortality rate also affected the largely female clientele using the *Monte di Pietà*. Against this background, pawning activity at the *Monte di*

³⁸ 1921 *Census*, 6-9, *RWGD* 1919-20, 13. During the Spanish Flu pandemic, Gozo contributed one-third of the total deaths while almost all the country districts in Malta, except Qrendi, remained unharmed.

³⁹ 1921 *Census*, 6.

⁴⁰ These were Rabat/Victoria (-436), Għasri (-19), Għarb (-15), San Lawrenz (-30), Sannat & Munxar (-15), Qala (-28) and Għajnsielem, Mġarr and Comino (-45). 1921 *Census*, 8.

⁴¹ Bowen-Jones et al, *Malta - Background for Development*, (Malta, 1960), 144, 149-50, 152.

⁴² 1931 *Census*, iii.

⁴³ Fr. L.E. Attard, *The Great Exodus (1918-1939)*, (Malta, 1989), 61.

⁴⁴ Bowen-Jones et al, *Malta*, 144, 149-50, 152. Even in 1958, this report still recommended emigration as return migration would create graver problems, VI-VII; M. Cauchi, *The Maltese Migrant Experience*, (Malta, 1999) & *Maltese Migrants in Australia*, (Gozo, 1990), 4-6 – villages like Għarb became ghost villages.

Pietà of Gozo increased both in the incidence of new clients and especially in the frequency of regular ones, thus showing that those who threaded a fine line between poverty and destitution were feeling the economic crisis as did those who were not so hard up. Another reason could have been the need for money by prospective emigrants.

The *Monte di Pietà* was a case where state and church came together to presumably help needy women and the poor in general. Rather than questioning the causes of poverty, these entities sought means to deal with its effects.⁴⁵ They did not seek to give employment to women, but to patronise them through charity. Of course, supporting this state of affairs, the Church always preached that a woman's place was in the home, seeing women as vessels of procreation.⁴⁶ As a result, it burdened couples with the obligation of large families and expected sacrifices from them,⁴⁷ poverty being one of them. The islanders, especially those in rural communities were the most devoted churchgoers with the local priest and the village church being the fulcrum of their life.⁴⁸ On the other hand, unlike Malta, Gozo suffered neglect at the hands of the colonial government: it paid as much tax as Malta but did not derive the same benefits proportionally especially under the item of Charitable Institutions.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ C. Dalli, Dalli, 'Beyond Charity: The Evolution of Credit as Charity in Malta 1400-1800', Paper read at conference: 'The bank of the Poor. The Credit upon Pledge and the Monte di Pietà in the Mediterranean (XVth to XIXth Centuries)', Naples, 24-25th September 2004, 2.

⁴⁶ Boissevain, (1967), 196; Pope Pius XI *Casti Connubii*, (Encyclical, Dec. 31,1930); Bowen-Jones et al., *Malta*, 80; C. Cassar, *Daughters of Eve*, (Mireva, Malta 2002), 135.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cassar, (1988) 91; 'the Maltese are among the most devoted sons and daughters of the Roman Catholic Church'; H. Luke, *Malta: An Account and Appreciation*, (Harrap, London, 1960), 221.

⁴⁹ 1912 *RCME*, 442.

The *Monte di Pietà* formed part of a strategy for making a better living or at least for making life bearable. It was usual for petty amounts to be pledged at the *Monte di Pietà* while the borrowing of substantial sums would be carried out on an individual basis.⁵⁰ As a matter of fact, the borrowing of substantial sums was carried out in this way: if a person needed quite a large sum of money, he would seek someone who was reputed to be well off and ask for a sum and promise to pay interest on it besides the capital. The terms and rates of interest varied according to individual agreements which were often made by word of mouth.⁵¹ Objects pawned at the *Monte* mostly provided small scale collateral credit to finance household subsistence living for some, while others pawned to obtain larger sums. The preponderance of women as pawning clientele is not surprising and, in fact, indicates that much of the petty pawning had to do with the keeping of family subsistence levels and other minor household needs together with unforeseen expenses which might not be so petty. Using the *Monte di Pietà* gave women the opportunity to be mistresses of their movable property and hence they gained some control on their household. However, this control was somewhat limited, at times depending on what stance a husband would take if he came to the knowledge of his wife's pawning activity.⁵² On the other hand, there were some instances of husbands who supported their wives and brothers or fathers who supported their unmarried sisters or daughters in that they even went to collect the pledges when they had saved

⁵⁰ 1912 *RCME*, 248; cf. Appendix 2 found in original thesis oral history interviews 2 & 3, with Lorenza Cremona, date: 16th Sept. 2008, location: Qala and Mgr., Gauci-Grech date: 27th Oct. location: Rabat; cf. Charts 2-5 in Appendix 1.

⁵¹ Ibid; ibid interviews 1& 2 with Mr. George Meylak, date: 27th July, 2008, location: Victoria, Gozo and Lorenzo Cremona.

⁵² Appendix 2 found in original thesis oral history interviews 2 & 3, with Lorenza Cremona, date: 16th Sept. 2008, location: Qala, Gozo and Mgr., Gauci-Grech date: 27th Oct. location: Rabat/Victoria, Gozo.

enough money to redeem them.⁵³ A very limited number of men pawned and redeemed at the *Monte di Pietà* of Gozo, which suggests that they either held the household purse strings or else a female was either not present or unable to pawn due to illness or some other family commitment.⁵⁴ These males could also have pawned for their own personal needs dictated either by economic wants or by vices.



Fig. 6 - Women were consumers and household managers. This subject is also barefoot like the women in figure 5. (NAG 767 (30/34).

Photo entitled: *Gozo woman with 'sorra', carrying purchases on her head*. C.1914-18.
Photo by John A. Mizzi.

⁵³ Evidence found on back of pawning tickets researched.

⁵⁴ See Figure 2 and Table 1 in Appendix 1 for gender distribution of clients at the *Monte di Pietà*.

This confirms the control role played by females as household managers and consumers and their struggles to make ends meet. Other ways of making ends meet were the keeping of fowls, rabbits, and at times caprines and ovines for one's own pot and for selling both the animal and its products.⁵⁵ This was practised across the social spectrum as even doctors' wives kept hen pens and were experts in using the typical Gozitan cottage cheeselets and eggs in cooking as their husbands were, more often than not, paid in kind.⁵⁶ Pawning was fitted in with the above economic and consumption housekeeping activities. Many people paid in kind and needed cash only when they couldn't do otherwise.⁵⁷ What they might have owned was a bit of agricultural land and/or gold. It was only in the late 1950s that a true money economy started developing in rural parts of the Maltese archipelago.⁵⁸

The gendered service the *Monte di Pietà* offered was one of the instances when women held their own and administered their movable property independently within certain parameters. The then Maltese law provided that after marriage a husband had the rights of usufruct and administration over a wife's dowry although it remained the property of the wife.⁵⁹ Property acquired subsequent to marriage was regarded as extra-dotal and unless there was a marriage contract which specified otherwise, it came to be regarded as part of the property acquired during marriage by the spouses and hence fell under the authority of the husband.⁶⁰ Though a first reading of the law might seem to elevate the wife to

⁵⁵ H. Frendo, *Censu Tabone – The Man and his Century*, Malta 2000, (2nd ed.2001), 22-3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bowen-Jones et al., *Malta*, 111; Frendo, 20, 23.

⁵⁸ Bowen-Jones et al., *Malta*, 111.

⁵⁹ *The Revised Edition of the Laws of Malta*, Vol. III, (Malta, 1942), Ch.23, 948-1032, 949-950.

⁶⁰ *Laws of Malta*, Vol.II, 16,V,III, 1316-1327, (1942); Boissevain, (1967), 197.

an equal basis with her husband, in reality, as long as the marriage lasted, she remained subservient. All acts such as contracts could be made by the husband alone while she needed his consent and assistance to sell the assets that belonged to her.⁶¹ These laws affected the commercial classes much more than they did the lower ones.

When it came to moveable property emanating from dowry, women from middle and lower classes could use the *Monte di Pietà* to practise a limited form of independence under the pretext, real or otherwise, of necessity. The patriarchal stance imposed from above by the law, the Church, and to a lesser extent by the *Monte di Pietà* itself, reflected the *de jure* authority of the head male in the household while the services offered by this charitable institution reflected the *de facto* authority very often in the hands of the head female in the same household.

Dowry was the key factor for all three categories of females specified by the *Monte*, namely daughters, wives and widows, and for the necessity and ability to pawn at the *Monte di Pietà*. The dowry system practised in Malta was direct as opposed to indirect dowry.⁶² It was the only property a woman could administer independently. A woman often worked for her dowry or for a portion of it.⁶³ Technically, a dowry was intended to support the newly weds, especially the husband at the time of marriage, but in fact it was also a property settlement in anticipation of the wife's parents' death. It was regarded as an anticipated portion

⁶¹ Article 8 of Ordinance 1 of 1873 provided that the wife needed her husband's 'consent and intervention' to sell or acquire property, even when the acquisition was gratuitous. See also *Civil Code of Malta* Sections 198, 1303 and 1838.4. *Laws of Malta*, Vol. II, 16, I & III, 1236-1312, 1316-1327, (1942).

⁶² Goody, 241.

⁶³ Boissevain, (1967), 197-8.

of inheritance, and the amount of the dowry was calculated as part of the family estate and deducted from the portion the daughter initially received when the estate was divided after the death of the last parent.⁶⁴ It also gave the daughter a measure of economic support should she be abandoned by her husband or remain widowed. It could also serve the purpose of a gift to their future grandchildren.⁶⁵ Therefore, a prospective wife had a legal right to a dowry in a society where inheritance was in principle to be divided equally among all siblings.⁶⁶ Marriage and dowry were also criteria which distinguished a wife from an unmarried woman and hence gave a certain status to middle class and a few lower class married women.⁶⁷ With the commercial class, on the island of Malta especially, the reverse was the case: spinsters were often, if not always, considered as partners in the business on an equal basis as their brothers.⁶⁸

A dowry could range from just a chest of drawers or other furniture, clothes, jewellery, cash, a couple of bed sheets to a single-roomed home (*għorfa*) where the couple could live or a plot of land where they could build a house. There, was however, no crushing moral obligation to provide a sumptuous dowry as there was in rural Greece and Cyprus.⁶⁹ This said, it should be noted that it was a common occurrence for the agricultural class in Gozo to dower fields.⁷⁰ This is explained by the fact that these people were very attached to the land and valued it very highly since it was their

⁶⁴ Boissevain, (1967), 197-8; Cassar, (2002), 31.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 198; *RCME* 1931, 33.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 197.

⁶⁸ M. Refalo, *The Maltese Commercial Class 1870-1914 – Business, Families, Networks*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, (2009), Dept. of History, University of Malta, 279.

⁶⁹ E. Friedl, *Vasilika, a Village in Modern Greece*, N.Y., (1963) passim; Argyrou, 82-83 & passim.

⁷⁰ Refalo, 280.

livelihood. Furthermore, they would have the considerable part of their estate in land. At the other end of the spectrum, some people were too poor or had too many females to provide a dowry for all, so it was quite often the case that daughters married with no dowry at all or else remained spinsters. Many but not all prepared the *corredo* or embroidered cottons and linens to dress up the matrimonial bed⁷¹ although not as elaborate as in Sicily⁷² Before and during marriage and after that marriage had ended, these daughters, wives and widows sought the services of the *Monte di Pietà* because of dowry – either to procure it or to hock it for their needs and necessities.

The civil status used to classify the female clients of the *Monte di Pietà* as daughters, wives and widows had more than one purpose. It was not only a matter of convenience for the institution but also a descriptive one for the female client concerned. Daughters were unmarried females. This might have meant eligible and non-eligible females. The former would be working towards a dowry while the latter would be struggling to survive and possibly caring for aged or ailing parents and/or perhaps disabled siblings. This category made up a substantial section of the population since families were large and socialising between villages minimal.⁷³ By 1931 some of these daughters were slowly growing to be independent in the sense that they could also find work as midwives and subordinates in the medical service as well as teachers even though salaries were meagre - Gozitans

⁷¹ Boissevain, (1967), 197-8.

⁷² J. Schneider, 'Trousseau as Treasure: Some Contradictions of Late Nineteenth-Century Change in Sicily', 81-120, in M.A. Kaplan, (ed.) *The Marriage Bargain* (USA1985), 81-120.

⁷³ 1931 *Census*, 50, the total of unmarried women (20-65 years) was 3,264 while married women numbered a close 3,850. Boissevain, (1993), 35-6, 56-8. Though there are not long distances between villages, the roads were bad and young people only met during village feasts. Many married into their own village.

were paid less than Maltese and females were paid still less than males.⁷⁴ Females were legally obliged to leave their job once they got married. Consequently, many of these employees preferred to remain single and independent rather than married, dependent and poor.⁷⁵

Wives, who constituted the largest share of the clients, were concerned with making ends meet and raising extra money for family needs. The third main party are widows, vulnerable females sometimes in the last phase of their life who would be pawning to provide for themselves and/or for their sibling(s)/offspring with whom they might have been spending their final years.⁷⁶

The clients of the *Monte di Pietà* were a microcosm of female Gozitan society in that the proportion of the categories of civil state of the clients is almost proportionally correspondent to the selfsame sections of the female population in general.⁷⁷ Interestingly enough, proportionally speaking, unmarried females feature less than housewives as clients of the *Monte* both in frequency and especially in number. Widows feature the least when compared to wives and daughters as categories

⁷⁴ 1912 *RCME*, 255. Salaries in Gozo were less when compared to Malta; Fenech, 256-260; "Monitors at the bottom scale of teaching were paid ludicrous pittances". GMR 983 *Poor Relief Measures: Measures taken by the Government for the Relief of the Working and Poorer Classes of the Population*, 2. Just after World War I poverty was rampant and the salaries of government employees which had been reduced before the war were not sufficient to keep body and soul together as this report states.

⁷⁵ 1931 *Census*, 50. There were 10 midwives and medical subordinates and 74 female teachers in Gozo. It was a very humble beginning, but it slowly started to make a difference. There were also 157 nuns (some of which would usually be Maltese and not Gozitan) but these are not of concern here.

⁷⁶ Chircop, (2006), 51-2.

⁷⁷ See Table 2 in Appendix 1. For this comparison, sample years 1921 & 1933 of the *Monte* clientele from available tickets were taken and compared to the 1921 & 1931 Gozitan population census.

of clients but their percentage as a category of clients of the *Monte* corresponds to their population proportion. Hence, they are proportionally represented at the *Monte*. When comparing the Gozitan female population and the *Monte's* female clientele by category percentually, wives and widows feature more than daughters. The *Monte* percentage of these two categories overcomes the corresponding population categories percentually showing that a good portion of both wives and widows recurred to the *Monte*. Hence, in 1921, wives constituted 16.57% of the general population, while 19.96% of the *Monte's* clients were wives. In 1931/33 they constituted 16.15% of the Gozitan population and 21.40% of the *Monte's* population.⁷⁸ When it comes to widows, they made up 3.05% of the Gozitan population in 1921 and 3.98% of the *Monte's* population, while in 1931/33 they made up 3.23% of Gozo's population and 4.08% of the *Monte's* population.⁷⁹ Therefore, these were the two categories that pawned most heavily when compared to their proportion of the population because they were those mostly in need.

The last and least category is that of males. Not only are they lesser in number in comparison both with females as a whole, and also when compared to each female group separately. The number of times males frequented the *Monte di Pietà* totals 888 out of a grand total of 12,142 or 7.31%.⁸⁰ These males who pawned were mostly the same clients time and again. They did not always redeem their wares. At times, they redeemed objects pawned by females, mostly their wives, sisters, mothers and daughters but at

⁷⁸ Sources for Gozitan population are taken from the 1931 Census, 26, while those for the *Monte* clients are taken from the actual 1933 pawning tickets since no tickets were found for 1931. See Table 2 in Appendix 1.

⁷⁹ For a comprehensive layout of these figures see Table 2 in Appendix 1.

⁸⁰ See Table 1 in Appendix 1.

other times there seems to be no relationship whatsoever with the female clients who had originally pawned the item. This shows that though mostly women saw that they redeemed what they had pawned, they also asked their male relatives to redeem for them.⁸¹

Gold was the main item pawned rather clothing, suggesting that the *Monte di Pietà* was not in fact serving the very poor but those who had something to pawn. It was just plain 18 carat gold items sometimes decorated with gemstones or pearls.⁸² Still, up to about two decades ago, plain gold was being offered in jewellery shops. It seems that the peasants preferred it, or that it was what one could find available at the Gozitan jewellery shops as local gold and silversmiths made traditional gold items for the local market. There was an import duty on foreign gold which made local gold much more popular.⁸³ The stringent controls applied by the Consul at the *Monte* over gold and silver items assured a prospective gold client that local work would definitely be 18 carat gold.⁸⁴ It was traditional for peasants and the slowly rising lower middle class to spend money on a gold gift for a family member, a close or favourite relative or a godchild on occasion of the conferring of one of the main sacraments such as baptism,

⁸¹ Evidence of this is the fact that male relatives sometimes redeemed, mostly for their wives. This proof is found on the actual pawning tickets. Appendix 2 in original thesis oral history interviews 2, with Lorenza Cremona, date: 16th Sept. 2008, location: Qala, Gozo. Lorenza Cremona says that some people preferred pawning at a local dubious village shop instead of going to the *Monte* due to the distance.

⁸² On every ticket the carat value together with the weight are stated. See List 1 in Appendix 1.

⁸³ MGG Supp. I, 1948, 'Report of the Collector of Imposts and Lotto for the year 1946-47, XVI.

⁸⁴ MGG Supp. I, 1948, 'Report of the Collector of Imposts and Lotto for the year 1946-47, XVI.

marriage, sacred orders (priests) and perhaps communion or confirmation.⁸⁵ Therefore, pawns more often than not had an emotional besides a monetary value.⁸⁶ Gold was considered to be both respectable and a form of investment.⁸⁷ This explains the availability of gold for pawning. Moreover, as a prospective pledge, gold secured a greater loan and was less cumbersome and perishable than clothes.



Fig. 7 - 18 carat gold necklace with semi-precious stones and simulated pearls. (Courtesy of Meylak Jewellers).

The most frequently pawned jewellery items were rings, rings with stones and earrings with or without pendants followed closely by

⁸⁵ Appendix 2 found in original thesis OH interview 3 with Mgr., Gauci-Grech date: 27th Oct. location: Rabat/Victoria, Gozo.

⁸⁶ H. Schrader, *Lombard Houses in St. Petersburg – Pawning as a Survival Strategy in Low Income Households?*, Münster, 2000, 101.

⁸⁷ H. Ganado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel vol.ii*, (Malta, 1974-77), 21.

the more expensive brooches and bracelets. Sometimes a single earring was pawned. At other times silver items, which were less expensive, were pawned. These consisted of silver jewellery and silverware.⁸⁸ However, there were no candlesticks or other silver home ornaments. Other more expensive items such as gold chains, gold watches, gold necklets and the like were pawned as well, suggesting a better off clientele even though gold chains and the long, intricate gold chains called *barbazzall* were popular with those relatively well-off peasants and members of the lower middle class who could afford to buy them.

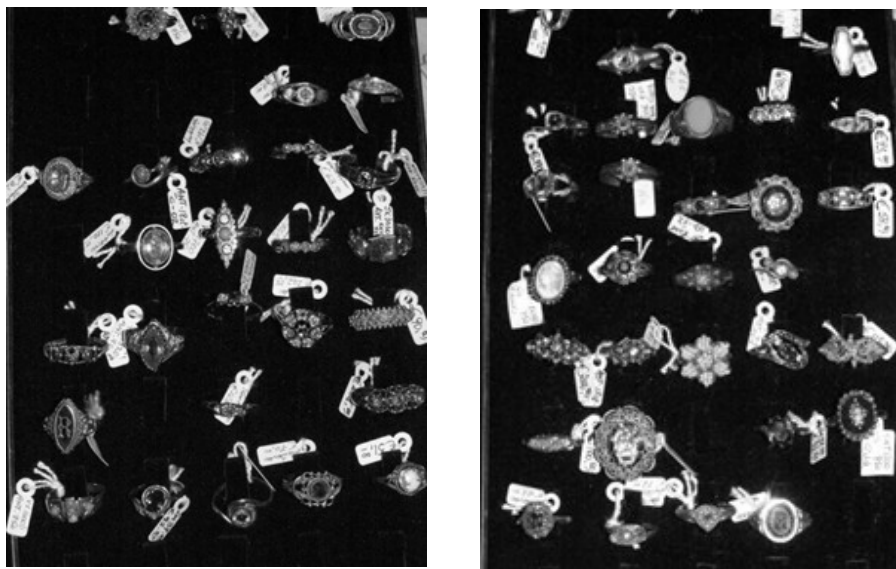


Fig. 8 Various 18 carat gold rings with pearls, cameos and semi-precious stones. (Courtesy of Meylak Jewellers).

⁸⁸ See List 1 in Appendix 1.

The majority of the objects pawned were female ornaments. Most males pawned female jewellery as well which might suggest that they either administered their wife's dowry with or without her consent or that there were no females in the household and they had inherited or else were hocking their mother's or another female relative's gold. On the other hand, some females did occasionally pawn male objects together with female ones such as gold or silver chain watches suggesting that such pawning was either a joint endeavour, or that these male ornaments were a family heirloom. A third hypothesis suggests that these females could be pawning without the permission of the male owner of the said item/s. This cannot be established in the case of the rings as they are listed as either plain gold rings or gold rings with stones, which does not specify if they were male or female ornaments at all.⁸⁹ Another question that arises here is how many of these plain gold rings were marriage rings or if any marriage rings were pawned at all. An indication of this would have showed how desperate or less desperate the clients of the *Monte di Pietà* were and what level of emotional attachment they held towards these symbols of marriage.

⁸⁹ See List 1 in Appendix 1.



Fig. 9 Various 18 carat gold earrings, brooches and bracelets with pearls, cameos and semi-precious stones. There are also two waistcoat watches without a chain. (Courtesy of Meylak Jewellers).

The variety of objects pawned and reasons for pawning highlight the *Monte di Pietà's* function as a bank of the poor and the less poor. Hence the *Monte di Pietà* was:

an approach to charity as a form of credit (which) rested on the assumption that alms degraded and humiliated recipients whereas a loan required the poor to work in order to repay it and recover their possessions frequently left with the lender as surety.⁹⁰

Therefore, the *Monte di Pietà* was an early form of empowerment which trickled down into the twentieth century and which

⁹⁰ S. Epstein, *Genoa and the Genoese, 958-1528*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London 1996, 306.

empowered women, in the short-term, within a patriarchal politico-religious and economic structure, as the recipients of one of the few forms of charitable credit available and the only form of dignified charitable credit. This in turn formed part of a multi-tentacled strategy to survive during various life and economic cycle crisis.⁹¹ It was a strategy to survive a crisis and not to better oneself significantly in the long term. Notwithstanding this, an underlying beneficial characteristic of this '*bank of the poor*' was that its system encouraged its clients to keep away from long-term indebtedness because they had to deposit a pawn of more than the same value of the amount advanced.⁹²

The amounts advanced at the *Monte di Pietà* vary from less than one shilling to, the more rare, ten to twenty pounds for females and from one shilling to up to between eight and ten pounds for males.⁹³ On a percentual basis females pawned more and they pawned several less valuable objects to reach their target amount. Though males pawned for lesser amounts, they pawned fewer but more valuable objects. Interestingly enough when it comes to case studies, females score highest in the one to four shilling range and higher than males in the four to five pound range which are among the highest and lowest amounts advanced while males score highest in the four to eight shilling and eight to twelve shilling range which are low to middling ranges. The common area highest for both sexes is the one to two pound range.⁹⁴ The lower amount ranges suggest subsistence level pawning while the higher ones imply pawning for post-subsistence items and needs. This shows that both male and female clients came from lower to middling

⁹¹ Chircop, (2006), 68-9.

⁹² Schrader, 1.

⁹³ All clients and case study charts have been left out here due to data protection as the clients might be relatives of Gozitans living today.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

classes and that they pawned according to their circumstances as sometimes the same clients pawned both small and larger sums.⁹⁵ When it comes to the overall amounts, the most frequent amounts during the years in question were those in the range of one to four shillings (2325), four to eight shillings (2349) and one to two pounds (2253) with eight to twelve shillings (1769) and twelve to sixteen shillings (946) quite close behind.⁹⁶

In conclusion, the quasi-totally female patronage of the *Monte di Pietà* shows that they were the household managers, were allowed a degree of independence in the management of their dowry and had little to turn to when it came to spinning or saving money or seeking some form of employment. There was the need of investment and development in areas such as the economy, the infrastructure, education, sanitation, and emigration to remarkably help the lot of these Gozitan women and hence their families and that was long in coming. They struggled to make ends meet using different skills to keep their heads above water and perhaps to be able to live a little more decently. They used this charitable institution as a safety net and as a shield against the backdrop of economic instability both locally and internationally. The flexibility of purpose when pawning is shown by the amounts lent which vary from the infrequent less than one shilling to the equally infrequent £5 or £10 and the very rare £20 showing that the needs of these clients ranged from subsistence levels to less basic ones. The popularity and possession of jewellery stemmed from the local gold-giving tradition and from inheritance. The female clients' use of this institution was within the parameters dictated by a geographically insular and male dominated society led by the teachings of a patriarchal Catholic Church and a paternalistic approach by the state.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Pawning tickets 1910-1939.

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Appendix 1

Figure 1: Proportion of Male to Female Clients of the Monte di Pietà, Gozo, 1910-1939.

(Source: Actual pawning tickets found for the years in question).

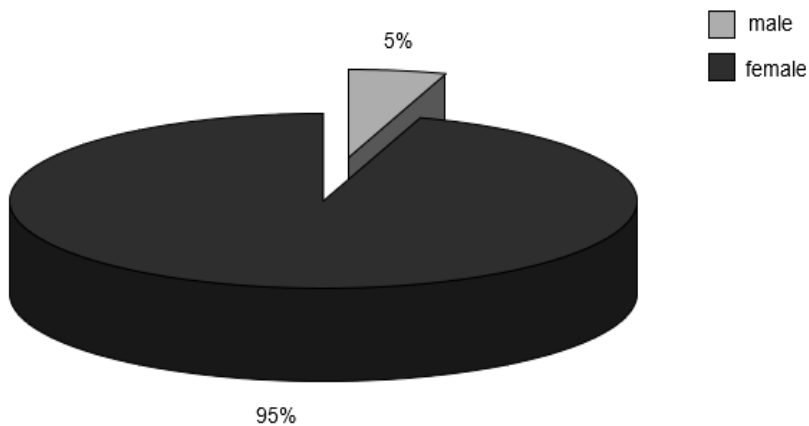


Figure 2: Proportion of Number of Clients who visited the *Monte di Pietà*, Gozo, 1910-1939.

(Source: Actual pawning tickets found for the years in question).

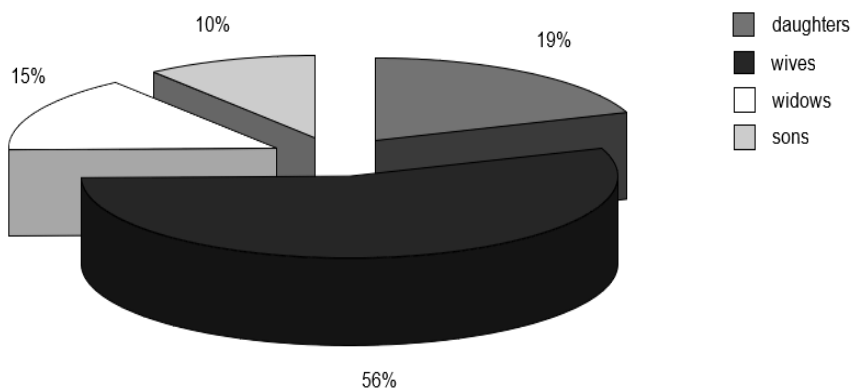


Figure 3: Female Clients of the *Monte di Pietà* in Proportion to the Gozitan Female Population, 1920. (Sources: Actual pawning tickets and 1921 Census).

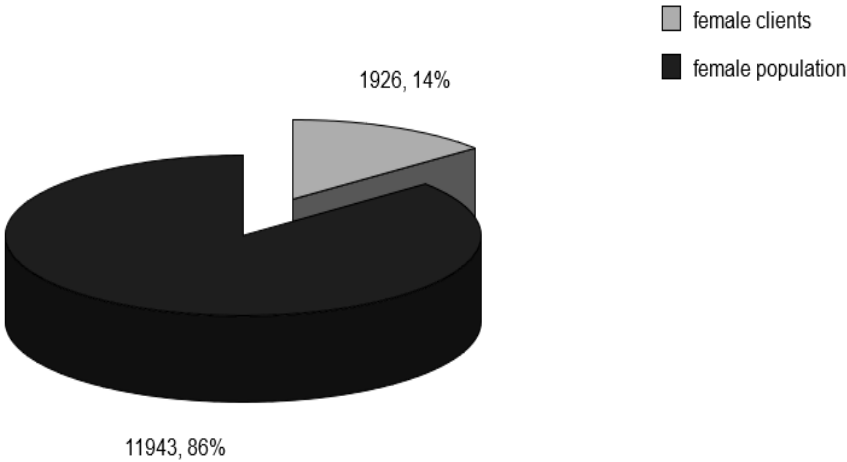
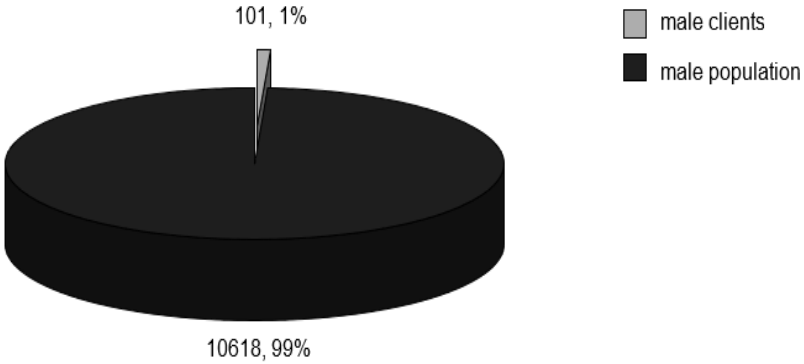


Figure 4: Male clients of the *Monte di Pietà* in Proportion to the Gozitan Male Population, 1920. (Source: Actual pawning tickets and 1921 Census).



Lists and Tables

Table 1: Frequency of Pawning for each Category of Clients of the *Monte di Pietà*, Gozo, 1910-1939.

	Daughter	Son*	Wife	Widow	None*
Grand Totals	2,866	888	6,479	1,468	441
Percentages	23.60%	7.31%	53.36%	12.09%	3.63%

* No information given as to civil status. However, these were all female clients.

+ Males were classified as sons and not as husbands or widowers. Both males and unmarried females were classified as sons and daughters respectively and only their father's name was given.

Table 2: Figures and percentages for general population and Monte population.

1921	Daughters*	Wives	Widows	Total Population
Population	2,785	3,739	687	22,561
Population %	12.34%	16.57%	3.05%	
Monte Population	136	316	63	1583
Monte %	8.59%	19.96%	3.98%	
1931				
Population	3,264	3,850	769	23,837
Population %	13.68%	16.15%	3.23%	
Monte Population (1933)+	63	131	25	612
Monte %	10.29%	21.40%	4.08%	

* Single females 20-65yrs, when speaking of population. Sources: 1921 & 1931 censuses.

+No records for 1931. Sources: actual pawning tickets.

Lists 1 and 2

Objects Pawned		
Cloth	Cotton	plain
		sheet
		wrapper
		counterpane
		valance
		sofa cover
		skirt
		shirt
		blouse
		jacket
		handkerchief
		table carpet
		pillowcase(s)
		curtain(s)
		stockings
		pinafore
		cassock
		mattress case
		sash
		frock
		napkins
		petticoats
		toilet cover
		trousers
		cloak
		towels
	Silk	plain
		shawl
		faldetta

Objects Pawned		
		skirt
		jacket
		scarves
	Silk & lace	handkerchief
Gold	Earrings	plain
		pendant
		pendant & stone
	Ring	plain
		stone
		diamond
		enamelled
		cameo
		with pendant
		with stone & pendant
	Brooch	plain
		stones
		pearls
		pearls & stone
		gold enamelled
		cameo
		with charm
		coral
	Medallion	plain
		stones
		pearls & stone
		with locket
		pearls
	Chain	plain
		watch
	Necklet	

Objects Pawned		
	Charm	plain
		with stone
		pearl & stone
	Locket	plain
	Safety pin	plain
	Bracelet	plain
		stones
		pearls
		pearls & stone
	Sleeve links	
	Studs	
	Gold watch	
	Gold beads	
Silverware	Cutlery	
	Coffee pot	
	Rosary	
	Watch	
	Chain	
	Other	

**Before time touched the shores
The coastline of Gozo 700 years ago**

Joseph Bezzina

Abstract:

A portolan carries a compilation of sailing directions with charts and description of ports, harbours, and coasts, indicating safe havens together with the distances and directions to reach them. Three portolans are of major significance vis-à-vis Gozo. The one being dissected in this paper is the *Chompasso de tuta la starea della marina*, the original of which is datable to the beginning of the fourteenth century, written in Venetian and probably composed in Venice. A fifteenth century copy of this portolan is preserved with analogous medieval manuscripts at the Vatican Library. This copy, based on the earlier Venetian version, originated as a nautical chart of the Mediterranean basin, later expanded to include other regions. It is the first known document referring to Gozo as the island with three hills.

Keywords:

Gozo-Malta, Medieval, Geography, Portolans.

Author's Bio-Note:

JOSEPH BEZZINA, was born in Victoria, Gozo. He studied at the University of Malta and the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. He was ordained priest by Pope Saint Paul VI in 1975. He holds three history degrees, including a *summa cum laude*, a First-Class Honours Doctorate in Church History, and is also the recipient of the *Pope's Award*, his University's highest honour, after placing first in the 1982 finals. For seventeen years, he was Head of Department of Church History, Patristics, and Paleo-Christian Archaeology at the University of Malta (1994–1911). He also lectured at the Sacred Heart Seminary, Gozo, and at the Pontifical Seminary of Albania, Shkodër. In August 1989, at the request of the Ministry for Gozo, he founded from scratch the Gozo Section of the National Archives of Malta and he directed it as Assistant National Archivist until 2020. In his capacity as Church historian and professional archivist, he presented researched papers in conferences throughout Europe. He has written over eighty books in English and Maltese. A number have been translated into French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. He is a member of the Gozo Cathedral Chapter.

Before time touched the shores

The coastline of Gozo 700 years ago

In July 1127, Count Roger the Norman succeeded to take over Malta and Gozo from the Muslims. Three years later, he was crowned King Roger II of Sicily and henceforth the Islands passed under the rule of the kings of Sicily and within the European sphere of influence.

1 • From Ghawdex to Gozo

The Sicilian Chancery, proceeding onomatopoeically from the Arabic/Maltese name *Ghawdex* Latinised the island's name into *Gaudisium*.¹ It is interesting to note the same sequence of consonant sounds in the two renderings. The use of the Latinised name became the standard in Ecclesiastical documents from the fifteenth century onwards.²

Through marriage and manœuvre, the Normans were succeeded, by the Swabians (1194), the Angevins (1266), and the Aragonese

¹ STANLEY FIORINI, *The roots of Christianity in Gozo, in The Gozo Cathedral, its history and treasures*, edited by J. Bezzina, Victoria-Gozo 2017, 41.

² STANLEY FIORINI, *The medieval Matrice of Gozo*, in *The Gozo Cathedral*, 73-111 passim.

(1283). The latter ruled over the Maltese archipelago up to 1530 and it was during the first decades of their long rule that the present name *Gozo* was coined.

It doubtlessly originated as a translation of *Gaudisium* into the Catalan/Spanish term *gozo*, a word interpreted as a noun meaning, 'joy, happiness' – ultimately from the Latin noun *gaudium*, joy, and the verb *gaudeo*, to rejoice.³

The name *Gozo* is in fact met with for the first time in documents using the vernacular soon after the establishment of Aragonese rule. A portolan entitled *Lo Compasso de Navegare*, datable to the last decade of the thirteenth century, preserves one of the earliest occurrences of this form.⁴ By the following century, the word *Gozo* had also crept into Latin documentation,⁵ and it was adopted by successive rulers of Malta and stuck for posterity.

2 • The early portolans

A portolan, from Italian word *porto*, harbour or port, carries a compilation of sailing directions with charts and description of ports, harbours, and coasts, indicating safe havens together with the distances and directions to reach them.

It must be clarified at this point that, strictly speaking, a harbour is any sheltered body of water where boats or ships may moor or anchor. A port is an installation that has been built around a harbour with facilities for loading and unloading such vessels. Ordinarily

³ STANLEY FIORINI, *The roots of Christianity*, 41.

⁴ BACCHISIO-RAIMONDO MOTZO, *Il compasso da navigare; opera italiana della metà del secolo XIII*, Cagliari 1947, 111-112.

⁵ *Documents in the State Archives of Palermo*, edited by Stanley Fiorini, Pt II/1 (= DSMH·Documentary Sources of Maltese History), Malta 1999, Doc. 242 (1398).

a harbour, either natural or man-made, must exist before a port facility can be set up.

These portolans precede the medieval and early modern map that focuses on maritime geography and includes a network of rhumb lines – lines that radiate from the centre in the direction of wind or compass points and used by pilots to lay courses from one harbour to another.

The majority of the roughly one hundred and thirty original portolans that survive were made in Italy or Catalonia and a few in Portugal. Some Catalan charts can be considered rudimentary world maps, while the Italian portolans tend to encompass only western Europe and the Mediterranean basin. Those mentioning Gozo originated in connection with one of the four Italian *Repubbliche Marinare* – Venice, Pisa, Genoa, and Amalfi.

Three portolans are of major significance vis-à-vis Gozo. The first is the aforementioned *Lo Compasso de Navegare* written predominantly in Tuscan and probably composed in Pisa.⁶ It is the oldest known portolan of the Mediterranean Basin as it dates back to around 1296.⁷ Another is the *Chompasso de tuta la starea della marina*, the original of which is datable to the beginning of the fourteenth century, written in Venetian and probably composed in Venice.⁸ A third is the *Portulano de navicantibus*, also in Venetian,

⁶ BACCHISIO-RAIMONDO MOTZO, *ibid.*

⁷ The original is in possession of the STAATSBIBLIOTHEK ZU BERLIN, the Berlin State Library, in its manuscript section and it is classified as Hamilton 396; for the description of the Maltese archipelago, 86r-87r.

⁸ AGOSTINO PERTUSI, *Le isole Maltesi dell'epoca Bizantina al periodo Normanno e Svevo (Sec. VI-XIII) e descrizioni di esse dal secolo XII al secolo XVI*, in *Byzantinische Forschungen* (Amsterdam) 5 (1977) 253-306. the earliest known copy is at the BAV·BIBLIOTECA APOSTOLICA VATICANA, *Latini series*, *Latini series*, 5300, 66r-v (Gozo and Comino).

and referred to as the *Portulano Rizo*⁹ as it was printed in 1490 by Bernardino Rizo.¹⁰

An early and fairly complete description of Gozo from a geographical and nautical point of view can be gleaned from the *Chompasso*, a fifteenth century copy of which is preserved with analogous medieval manuscripts at the Vatican Library.¹¹ This copy, based on the earlier Venetian version, originated as a nautical chart of the Mediterranean basin, later expanded to include other regions.¹²

3 • An island with three hills

In the section offering descriptions to navigators plying the Mediterranean southwards from Sicily, the *Chompasso* indicates with clarity how to recognize the Maltese archipelago and, specifically, the island of Gozo lying to Malta's northwest.

In its original Venetian, the portulan states: *La cognosenza si è tal chi vien ver Cecilia vedi lo Gozo in tre monti; lo mezani si è mazior, sovra 'l qual si è un Castel de Malta, zioè del Gozo* – whoever is navigating from Sicily can identify Gozo as an island with three hills; the middle is higher and upon its top there is the Castle of Malta, that is of Gozo.¹³ This is the first known instance of the appellation of Gozo as the island with *three hills*.

⁹ The original is also at the BAV-BIBLIOTECA APOSTOLICA VATICANA, *Latini series*, *Latini series*, 29r-30v (Gozo).

¹⁰ KONRAD KRETSCHMER, *Die Italienischen Portolane des Mittelalters: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Kartographie und Nautik*, Berlin 1909, 221-222.

¹¹ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 66r-v (Gozo and Comino).

¹² AGOSTINO PERTUSI, *ibid.* For a full transcription of the section related to Gozo and Comino, see 302-303.

¹³ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 66r.

This description indicated to navigators between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century has been proven quite reliable. A photo of Gozo by Marcella-Giulia Pace, a well-known Sicilian star-trail photographer, shot from Gatto Corvino, Ragusa, clearly shows a silhouette of Gozo, some eighty-six kilometres away, as an island with three hills. Indeed, in a high definition image, Iċ-Ċittadella outline is perceivable.¹⁴

This means that Gozo, the island with three hills, is not just an epithet but a navigational landmark employed since about seven hundred years ago. The *Universitas Gaudisii*, a sort of regional council, was aware of this navigational landmark. So much so that, at some point in time, it started to authenticate its *capitula* and other official documents with a seal depicting three hills.

The *Universitas Gaudisii*, founded on or sometime after 7 October 1350, was fully autonomous from that of Malta. Gozo and Malta were sister municipalities of the Sicilian kingdom. Citizenship of one did not confer citizenship of the other. There were multiple occasions when they collaborated, but just as many occasions when they showed a surprising amount of petty jealousy and alienation towards each other.¹⁵ The municipality of Gozo is listed separately from that of Malta in official documents, a supreme example being a royal mandate approved by the Parliament of Syracuse on 3 October 1398.¹⁶

¹⁴ Marcella-Giulia Pace had originally uploaded a photo of Gozo shot from Contrada Pizzillo, Ragusa, Sicily (36°49'41.9N 14°37'30.0E) on her FB page (25 Dec 2016). Daniel Cilia, the renowned Gozitan photographer, contacted her and she shot a second photo (21 May 2019) to be reproduced in a publication that we were then jointly preparing.

¹⁵ GODFREY WETTINGER, *The history of Gozo from the early Middle Ages to modern times, in Gozo – the roots of an island*, ed. by Charles Cini, Valletta 1990, 62-63.

¹⁶ DSMH II/1, Doc 242.

The *capitula* or petitions, so called as their physical format was in paragraph form, Latin *capitula*, were presented for approval by the King and eventually endorsed or withheld through Parliament. It is not known when the Gozo Universitas started to authenticate its documents with a three-hills seal. The earliest known is a mid-sixteenth century specimen on a document at the Cathedral Archives, Mdina.¹⁷ It shows three hills with the middle hill slightly higher than the outer two. The hills are depicted cylindrically with a semi-spherical top.

4 • The coastline from Ras il-Qala towards the north-west

The Venetian *Chompasso de tuta la starea della marina*, besides identifying Gozo as the island with three hills, includes a fairly detailed description of its coastal landmarks at the turn of the fifteenth century.¹⁸

The portolans were especially intended for Italian or Catalan sailors and therefore they contain a proportion of translations from the original in addition to the inevitable orthographical problems.¹⁹ In one instance, the *Chompasso* gives three differently spelled names for the same spot in Gozo. This is a result of a difficulty by the author to combine letters to represent sounds and to form words of the Arabic/Maltese spoken at that time; it is also a result of copyists unfamiliar with the actual sounds of the place-names. Nonetheless, it offers a fairly good idea of the well indented 43-km long coastline

¹⁷ Reproduced by GIAN PIETRO FRANCESCO AGIUS DE SOLDANIS, *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano*, 1746 : NAG·NATIONAL ARCHIVES GOZO, ZM/01, 001.

¹⁸ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 66r-v (Gozo and Comino); for a full transcription, PERTUSI, *ibid*, 302-303.

¹⁹ GODFREY WETTINGER, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands* (ca. 1300–1800), Malta 2000, xxxiv.

of Gozo with its harbours, bays, creeks, sandy beaches, and rocky coves seven hundred years ago.

The portolan starts with a journey *dal porto del'isola de Malta*, specifically from *Marsachibir*²⁰ – Marsa Kbir, the original name of the Grand Harbour – proceeding in a north-westerly direction *al'isola de Gozo*. Along this route, the first cape or promontory of the island of Gozo that comes into view is *cavo de Murtela*. This is certainly a reference to Cape 'Ras il-Qala'. It is of interest of how the sound of the Arabic/Maltese name is transcribed into Venetian.

There is no mention of the inlets of Daħlet Qorrot, San Blas, and, surprisingly, even Ir-Ramla is left out. The description proceeds north-west towards the harbour of *Marsaforno*, Marsalforn. This is the first of three coastal place-names in Gozo starting with *Marsa*, a remnant of the Arab rule, and a word consistently written the same in the original.

The word *marsa* refers to a harbour or anchorage, and it recurs frequently in place-names on both sides of the Mediterranean littoral. Among the best known are Marsa Matruh, Egypt; La Marsa, Tunisia, where many Gozitans emigrated in search of work in the nineteenth century; and Marsa al-Kabir, Algeria. On the other side, there is the major port of Marseille, France. In nearby Sicily, there is Marsala, that is Marsa'Alī, and the small port of Marsamemi, the closest point of Sicily to Gozo. In Malta, there is il-Marsa, Marsaxlokk, Marsamxett, and Marsaskala.

²⁰ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 64v.

5 • Marsalforn – the principal port of Gozo

The *Chompasso* dedicates its most detailed description to Marsalforn, confirming that at that time it was the principal port of Gozo, a fact fully corroborated by later medieval documents.

Marsalforn is described as a *cavo de barche a tuti venti fuora che a forte tramontana*, a haven for boats in all winds, except when blowing strongly from the north. It is precisely at this point, that the portolan inserts the aforementioned description of how to identify Gozo when sailing from Sicily.

The author of the *Chompasso* states that when approaching Marsalforn from the sea, *due faragloi in tera* come into vision. A *faraglióne* is a monolithic rock mass, so this is a reference to none other than the two knolls known since time immemorial as 'Il-Qolla l-Bajda' and 'Il-Qolla s-Safra'. The first, to the west, is at the farthest end of the anchorage. The second is also to the west but further inland, so much so that it is described as rising from the harbour itself, *l'un di qual de ver ponente e sovra 'l fondi del porto*.

A photo of Marsalforn of circa 1900 does indeed depict Il-Qolla s-Safra as rising directly from the sea.²¹ This attests that for six hundred full years the contours of this knoll had not been disturbed. It was only in the second decade of the twentieth century that a road was dug out along the whole length of the slopes parallel to the sea of Il-Qolla s-Safra. Il-Qolla that indeed rose from the harbour at that time is now buried behind a forest of apartments.

Past the entry to the port *de ver levante fra tera due balestrate*, to the east at double the distance covered by a cross-bow, *si è una*

²¹ NAG, PA, 01/15, no 815.

grotto, there is a grotto. It further states that as at that point *e si à la riva blancha come uno forno e perzò à nome Marsa forno*. And as the shoreline at that point is white as a *forno*, [the harbour] has been named *Marsa forno*. This is a reference to Għar Qawqla that was battered away by the sea in the early twentieth century. Truly enough, it rested on an outcrop of white rocks.

The word *forno* in Venetian, especially in the Cadore region, refers to a cavern.²² *Forno*, ultimately from Arabic *lifurna*, is a cavern hollowed out by the waves. This reference is a further confirmation that the toponym Marsalforn has nothing to do with an oven, as has been parroted back by several writers, but with a cavern.

The importance of Marsalforn deserved further information. *Item de ver ponente si è una mota plana sovra 'l cavo, là ch'è de piere seche e una gliexia de Sancta Maria* – then to the west there is a flat area and above it a promontory with dry-stone walls and a church of Santa Marija. This is a reference to the well-documented chapel upon *il-Ponta ta' Santa Marija*,²³ by which name the place is known to this day.

It further adds *et è stazio uno prodexi ala ponta e le anchore ver levante*. A *stazio* in Venetian refers to the spot where gondolas could be berthed,²⁴ so this means that both to the west as well as to the east of Marsalforn there were several moorings. It was indeed a port in the full sense of the word.

It proceeds that *item ver levante si è la gliexia de San Polo* – that also to the east [of the harbour] there is the church of St Paul. This church, rebuilt over and over again, stands on the same spot to this day.

²² *Dizionario Treccani*, s.v. *forno*.

²³ AEG·EPISCOPAL ARCHIVES GOZO, *Pastoral Visit* (1598) 166v.

²⁴ *Dizionario Treccani*, s.v. *stazio*.

The writer of the portolan, at this point, inserts the distance from the main port of Gozo to Iċ-Ċittadella. *E si è da Mar(sa) lo forno al Castelo del Gozo per tera mia III*. The distance from Marsalforn to the Castle, through what was probably a winding dirt trail, is three miles (4.8km). This is an incredible accurate figure as the distance up the present roughly straight road from Marsalforn to Iċ-Ċittadella is 4.3km.

Marsalforn was indeed Gozo's gateway to Malta and the Mediterranean world. This port was not navigable when wind blew from the northwest. On such occasions, boats sailed out of Mġarr, a small exposed inlet on the south-east coast and the closest point of Gozo to Malta. However, Mġarr was considered unsafe during the summer months as the coves of Comino were infested with pirate ships ready to plunder crossing craft.

In late medieval times, there are clear indications that from Marsalforn there were direct links to Malta, to several ports in Sicily,²⁵ and possibly to Tunisia.²⁶ From Marsalforn, boats sailed either to Ta' Skrajda, the extreme right seawards of Mellieħa Bay, Malta, if the destination was the capital city of Mdina, or to Birgu in the case of merchandise.²⁷

From Marsalforn there were a regular direct links to both Syracuse and Licata;²⁸ the former being about 52 nautical miles (97km) away, while the port of Licata lies at a distance of about 75 nautical miles (139 km). Syracuse was the seat of the parliament, while Licata was well connected with Palermo, the bureaucratic centre of Sicily. Indeed, at times residents of Malta came over to Gozo to travel

²⁵ NAG, UG-Universitas Gaudisii, *Acta*, 2, 436v

²⁶ JOSEPH BEZZINA, *1551 – the siege that stifled Gozo*, Gozo 2021, 19.

²⁷ NAG, UG, *Acta*, 3/1614–1615, 177r-v.

²⁸ NAG, UG, *Acta*, 2 (9 Dec 1593) 436v.

to Sicily.²⁹ Some even exported cattle through Gozo, a practice the town-council of Malta prohibited on 11 September 1472.³⁰ The relations of Gozo with Licata had grown to such an extent that, on 8 June 1470, during a discussion in the same town-council, it was suggested that *ki si scriva a lu Signuri Viceré ki sia unu consulu comu era solitu per Goczuz*, that is, to petition the Viceroy so that as usual, Gozo should have its own consul at Licata.³¹

6 • Up to Cape San Dimitri and beyond

The *Chompasso* does not indicate the bays of 'il-Qbajjar,' 'ix-Xwejni', and 'Wied il-Għasri'; they were of little relevance to mariners.

The next important mention is *Cavo San Dimitri, che è cavo del Colzo de ver ponente, et è basso et aguzo quasi longo a mar cho' una testa de fiera mia V per ponente*. The cape of San Dimitri, about five miles to the west [of Marsalforn], is the western promontory of Gozo; it is low and tapering to a rough headland into the sea.

It is not far-fetched to presume that the Cape was so called after a chapel dedicated to St Demetrius, a Greek Christian martyr of the early fourth century. The chapel might have been a remnant of the Byzantine–Greek Church that, it is proven, survived in Gozo well into the thirteenth century.³² His patronage was especially sought by farmers, peasants, and shepherds. At that time, the majority of the population of Gozo thrived on farming and husbandry.

²⁹ *Acta Iuratorum et Consilii Civitatis et Insulae Maltae* [a transcription with notes of NLM·NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MALTA, *Univ.* 11] edited by Godfrey Wettinger, Palermo 1993, Doc 384.

³⁰ *Ibid*, Doc 454 [NLM, *Univ.* 11, 225r].

³¹ *Ibid*, Doc 384 [NLM, *Univ.* 11, 595v].

³² JOSEPH BEZZINA, *A history of the Church in Gozo – from megalithic shrines to contemporary times*, Gozo 2025, 51–59.

From Cape San Dimitri, the description proceeds towards the south, the *Isola de Duera ... soto alte mon[ta]gne e blanche*, to the islet of Dwejra, situated under towering whitish heights.

In between Cape San Dimitri and Dwejra, there is no reference to either 'Il-Qawra', the so-called inland sea, nor to 'It-Tieqa', the former famous Azure Window. 'L-Għar taż-Żerqa', the tunnel leading to the inland sea could have been missed, but not the gigantic Azure window if it stood at that time. The reason that it is not mentioned is obvious.

The *Isola de Duera is at the bocha dela chala*. The islet of Dwejra, a reference to Ħaġret il-Ġeneral, is at the entrance of the harbour 'il-Qala tad-Dwejra'. This islet has a maximum length of about 182 metres, and a height of 61 metres. The *Chompasso* caution sailors to be wary of entering the harbour, due to the danger of sailing out if the wind starts blowing from the north. The harbour is described as very deep.

Beyond Dwejra there is a linear strip of towering rugged cliffs up to another harbour known as *Marsalandro*.³³ This is the second *marsa* place-name. It is composed of an Arabic and Greek word, *marsa* and *xelandion*, a Byzantine light boat, a word that is possibly a remnant of the Byzantine period. Two of the Greek consonants appear in the same succession in Venetian. The reference is to present day Xlendi about which the *Chompasso* provides no further details.

7 • From Mġarr ix-Xini to the Gozo-Comino channel

The description of the portolan proceeds *per griego ver levante*, east-north-east and then west up to a third *marsa* place-name,

³³ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 66v.

Marsafumo, a name that is no more. *Fumo*, possibly from Arabic *fum* (فم), means mouth and, by extension, an opening, an entrance, a point of access to a *marsa*.³⁴

It describes the place as a narrow port with an islet at its mouth. It further states that it is an ideal *stàzio*, a good place for mooring as it provides shelter from all winds. *Marsafumo* eventually became *Marsa Xini*,³⁵ the present *Mġarr ix-Xini*, as it perfectly fits the portolan's description. The tiny islet is now known as 'Haġret il-Fessej'.

The *Chompasso*, for the second time, provides the distance from this port to iċ-Ċittadella, three miles (4.8km). As in the case of Marsalforn, it is very accurate. From this detail, it is possible to infer that this was the second most frequented port of Gozo in medieval times.

From *Marsafumo*, the next place of call *per griego ver tramontana*, north-east and north, is *Miciaro*, present day Mġarr, well-known according to the author for *una bona fontana soto la grotta e core fin a mare fin ala spaza*, a good spring beneath a cavern that runs up to the sea and is quite bountiful.

As a matter of fact, the Arabic place-name Mġarr, plural of *mġra*, water courses,³⁶ must have originated from this spring and at least another two in the vicinity. The author of the portolan confirms the notoriety of this spring for he adds that even the ships anchored off the island of Comino sail to Gozo to replenish their water cisterns.

At this point, the description of the *Chompasso* skips forward three miles, to the northeast up to the point of departure, the *cavo de*

³⁴ FRANCIS X. CASSAR, *Note to Joseph Bezzina* (8 Nov 2024).

³⁵ WETTINGER, *Place-Names*, 365.

³⁶ WETTINGER, *Place-Names*, 376, citing, among others, SALVATORE CUSA, an authority on Arabic place-names.

Murtela. Almost mid-way between Mġarr and this Cape, it refers to *una chaleta soto un gliexia de Sancta Maria*, an inlet beneath a church of Santa Maria. This nameless inlet is the present ‘Hondoq ir-Rummien’ and the church has since then been built further inland.³⁷ It further states that from this inlet to Comino there is about a mile, noting that it is quite a wide channel through which ships can sail without any problem.

The *cavo de Murtela* is also referred to as *Cavo del Gozo*, the Cape of Gozo, *zioè a Rivoltela*, and again the same promontory is mentioned by a third but parallel name *Montela*. These are the three differently spelled names for the same spot referred to *supra*. Of these three, the closest to the Arabic/Maltese ‘Ras il-Qala’ is onomatopoeically *Rivoltela* as the three consonants r-l-l are in the same sequence as in Maltese.³⁸

8 • Comino and Cominotto

The *Chompasso* mentions the islands of *Comin* and *Chomineto* situated across the channel from the Cape of Gozo. It warns that it is not possible to sail in the direction of the islands with a heavy swell, but during summer it is possible to anchor in their vicinity.³⁹

It is further noted that to the northeast of Comino, there is a cove known *de Santa Maria* with a church clearly visible at its edge. Not far towards the west, there is a good *stàzio*, a reference to

³⁷ This suggests that the site of the present sanctuary of the immaculate conception, qala, was close to the coast; the present site is too inland to be visible from the gozo-comino channel.

³⁸ VICTOR J. GALEA, *Qwiel u qaddisin fil-folklor u t-twemmin f'għajdut il-Maltin u l-Għawdxin*, Gozo-Malta 1999, 88-89.

³⁹ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 66v-67r.

the present 'San Niklaw' bay; and further on beyond the cape of Comino, there is a reference to the stretch of sea between Comino and Cominotto, 'Bejn il-Kmiemen', now dubbed the Blue Lagoon. This stretch is suggested as another good *stàzio per tuti venti*, an anchorage spot sheltered from all winds, except a strong northeast.

In conclusion, the *Chompasso* provides the distance from the Cape of Gozo to Malta and to the main harbours on the mid-Mediterranean trade routes – to Sciacca and Mazara del Vallo, on the southwestern coast of Sicily; to the island of Pantelleria; and, further to the west, to Mahdia in Tunisia and the islands of Linosa and Lampedusa.⁴⁰

The *Chompasso de tuta la starea della marina* is indeed a document of unparalleled importance for the history and geography of Gozo as it provides a glimpse of the island and its coastline before time touched its shores.

⁴⁰ BAV, *Latini series*, 5300, 67r.

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