

Gozo After the Siege of Malta: A study of the Acts of Notary Tomaso Gauci 1566-68

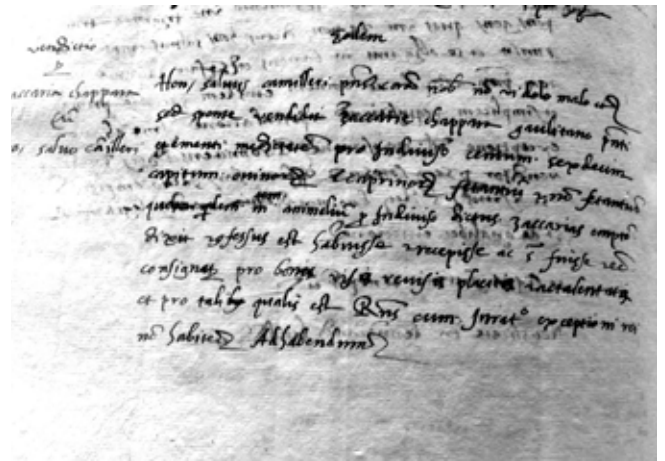
MARIANA GRECH

Introduction

Following the ransacking of Gozo in July 1551 (Camilleri, 1996), life in Gozo was soon re-established, but it took time for things to settle down again and for life to return to its normal course.

As the island of Gozo was depopulated, the Maltese people started migrating to their sister island. A number of explanations were proposed as to what attracted the Maltese to the island of Gozo which was so vulnerable to attacks and which had just witnessed such a sacking. However it seems that the main attraction was the fact that they could easily acquire property in Gozo. This can be partly supported by the acts of Tomasso Gauci in contracts which are mostly related to agriculture such as the trade in animals. For example on 30

August 1567, Andrea Luchia, a Gozitan, sold three oxen, a cow, an ass and 27 head of cattle amounting to 32 *uncie* 24 *tareni* to Brancatio burg of *casali gregori* Malta *habitator huius terra et insule Gaudisii* (NAV R287/4, f.221v)¹.



NAV R287/4, f.181v



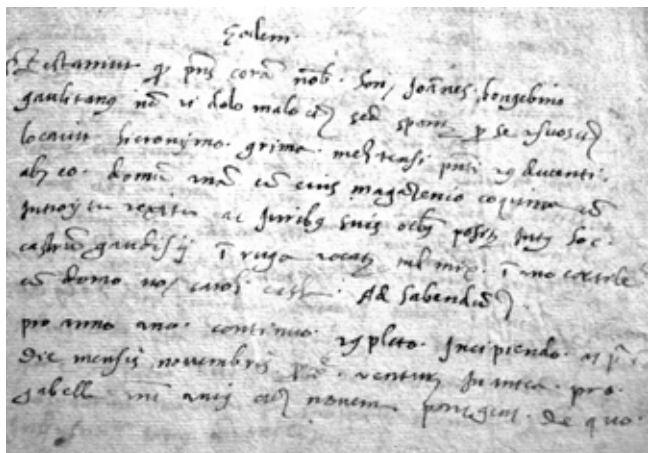
Manuscript R287: the acts of notary Tomaso Grech at the Notarial Archives Valletta.

¹ This reference and others of this type refer to the following where NAV is the Notarial Archives Valletta; R287 is the code which refers to the acts of notary Tomaso Gauci and /3 refers to the volume number; f refers to folio (or page) and r and v (Recto and Verso) refer to the front and back of a page or folio respectively.

Leasing of Property

A very important attraction for Maltese farmers was the fact that there was ample land available for leasing in Gozo. There were a number of landowners who had vast estates of land which remained uncultivated and these provided the Maltese farmers with ample opportunity to obtain land from which they could make a better life for themselves. In the acts under review there are a number of examples with the lender being, in most cases, Gozitan. Some of them include, Joanne Grego, a Gozitan, who on 29 October 1566 leased to Dominico Tumne, a Maltese living in Gozo, one-fourth of a field on the Island of Gozo (NAV R287/4, f.41r). Another example is that of Guarino Plathamone who on 3 March 1568 leased to Laurentio Mifsud, a Maltese living in Gozo, a farm with its fields and cisterns in Gozo in *gued il melach* (Wied il-Mielah) for four years starting at the beginning of the following August (NAV R287/4, f.201r).

Apart from land there was also the leasing of houses and even sometimes animals. The leasing of houses was fairly common and these were sometimes leased with the lands surrounding them, and frequently with their store rooms. An example of this is a lease given by Joanne Bongebino who leased a house with its store room and kitchen in the Castle of Gozo to Hieronymo Grima, a Maltese. This lease was to be for the duration of one year starting the following November for the price of 1 *uncie* 9 *tareni* (NAV R287/4, f.26r).



NAV R287/4, f.26r

Apart from the Maltese, there seems to have been foreign people, especially from Sicily who

came to live on the Island of Gozo. In the records studied, a number of people described mostly as '*siculo habitator huius terre et Insule Gaudisii*' are found.

This interaction between the Gozitans, the native population of the island, the Maltese and foreigners who, for various reasons, decided to migrate to this small island, contributed to the initial phases of economic and social reconstruction of Gozo following the 1551 event.

Gozitan Land-owners

The majority of the Gozitans who appear in the notarial acts under review are all linked to agriculture. Most of them even appear to be landowners. However, as one goes through the records of Notary Tomaso Gauci, it is clear that there were a number of people belonging to the same family who were involved in many transactions recorded by this notary. The majority of these people belong to the families of the upper class in Gozo and thus they had money and land with which to do business. These people were the first to be redeemed from slavery after the attack of 1551 and thus by 1566 they were actively participating in the economic activities which were being revitalised on the island.

All of them appear constantly in the acts under study but the most prominent family is the Plathamone. Persons like Guarino Plathamone, who appears frequently in the acts under review, was one of the jurats in the Gozitan council in 1575. Guarino Plathamone and Magnifico Antonino Plathamone are seen in many instances buying and selling such as when Guarino sold an ass *pili morelli* to Magnifico Antonino Deguyara for 4 *uncie* 24 *tareni* on 17 February 1557 (NAV R287/4, f.99r), or when Magnifico Antonino sold an ass and a mule *pili falbi* to Matheo Refalo for 3 *uncie* 6 *tareni* (NAV R287/4, f.57v [21.11.1566]).

There were also in Gozo people who acted as procurators for those still in captivity. Through these procurators, the people who were held captives could still hold on to their lands. An example of this is Martino Mule. It was actually his father, Marcus Mule, who was appointed by the Governor of Gozo to administer the possessions of

certain captives. However, Marcus Mule was taken prisoner himself and thus his son, Martino Mule, became the curator of his father taking on all of his responsibilities (NAV R287/4, f.49v).

Agriculture as the Basis of the Economy

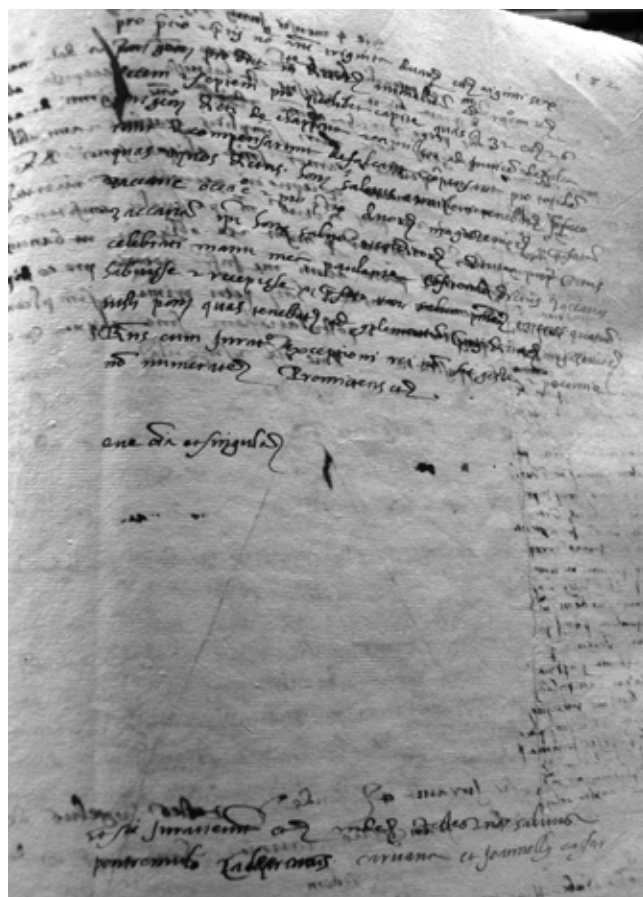
The economy of Gozo, like that of Malta, was mainly based on agriculture and the raising of livestock. However there were also other activities mostly related to the marine environment such as external trade, corsairing and fishing. Cotton and cumin were the main cash crops and their trading, as well as that of textiles, also played an important part in the economy of the islands. From the proceeds which resulted from the exportation of these products, the Maltese imported wheat and other necessities. Gozo also produced wheat, barley, legumes, fruit and wine and the practice of animal husbandry was widespread. Even though the population of Gozo lived in the Castle of Gozo there were farm buildings all along the countryside as well as vineyards and orchards (Wettinger, 1981). Additionally, with the arrival of the Knights of St. John, the practice of privateering flourished and also began to contribute towards the economy of Malta.

Cereals were the main source of the sustenance of a society in the sixteenth century. For small islands like Malta and Gozo this considerable demand for cereals could not be supplied by the local produce and thus the importation of these necessities was of vital importance. For the Maltese Islands the wheat was imported from Sicily (Wettinger, 1981). The agricultural related problems were due to the fact that the islands were small and the soil was of poor quality. These problems were intensified during the Siege of 1565 when thousands of Turks were stationed on mainland Malta. They had arrived before the grain harvest was completed and having looted and despoiled all that could be found, they left behind a catastrophe, as was their intention. The livestock was used to sustain the defenders or was captured by the Turks.

Having said this, when looking at the acts under study, one can see that the situation in Gozo was a bit different. Here the production seems to have continued in the years following the siege of 1565 and the records give quite a good

number of contracts which deal with the trade in cereals. Small transactions of less than 10 *salme* were most common. For example, Guglielmo la Russa sold 1 *salme* barley to Silvestro Zahra on 18 April 1567 for the price of 16 *tareni* payable on the Feast of St John the Baptist (NAV R287/4, f.149r). Guglielmo la Russa was involved in the bigger transactions. On 20 January 1568 he sold 40 *salme* barley to Leonardo Pachi of Zebug (Żebbuġ) Malta for 76 *uncie* 8 *tareni* at the price of 23 *tareni* per *salma* (NAV R287/4, f.117v).

Wheat is only mentioned a few times in these acts and one of the references is in a contract of debt between Joanne Haius and Antonius Danfansino, a Gozitan. In the contract Danfansino stated that he owed Haius 3 *uncie* 21 *tareni* in order to complete a payment for a certain quantity of barley and wheat (NAV R287/4, f.9r [18.09.1566]). After barley the most popular cereal is grain; *frumenti mixti* and *frumenti necti*. Most of the time, grain was sold in conjunction with barley such as when on 13 May 1568 Pasquale Grima sold to Mariano Fanchel of Rabbato (Rabat) Malta 2 *salme* barley and 1 *salme frumenti necti*; dried grain, for the price of 3 *uncie* (NAV R287/4, f.179v).



NAV R287/4, f.182r

As one can notice there were many Maltese people who were buying cereals in Gozo. This was presumably to feed the much larger population on Malta especially when keeping in mind the utter devastation of the agricultural lands left by the Turks following the events of 1565. Cereals were also used as a means of payment, in kind, for work. Augustino Circheppo agreed to work for Federico Caruana for one year against a payment of 5 *uncie* 3 *tareni*, and an amount of mixed wheat (NAV R287/4, f.8r [18.09.1566]). Cereals were also used to pay for leases and *gabella*, a farmhouse with its fields. This is the case of Dionisio Vella who was given a lease, in a *gabella* in Gozo by Magnificus Antonio Plathamone for two years starting on the previous 15 August against a payment of 4 *salme* barley and 1 *salma* grain per annum (NAV R287/4, f.142v [24.02.1568]).

Animal Husbandary

In a world based on agriculture, animals and livestock were vital for survival. The beasts of burden were considered to be ‘bulky merchandise’ (Cassar, 1996: 17) and when sold, great attention was given to ensure an accurate description of their colour, sex and whether they were mules, donkeys, oxen or horses as this could reflect a difference in the price.

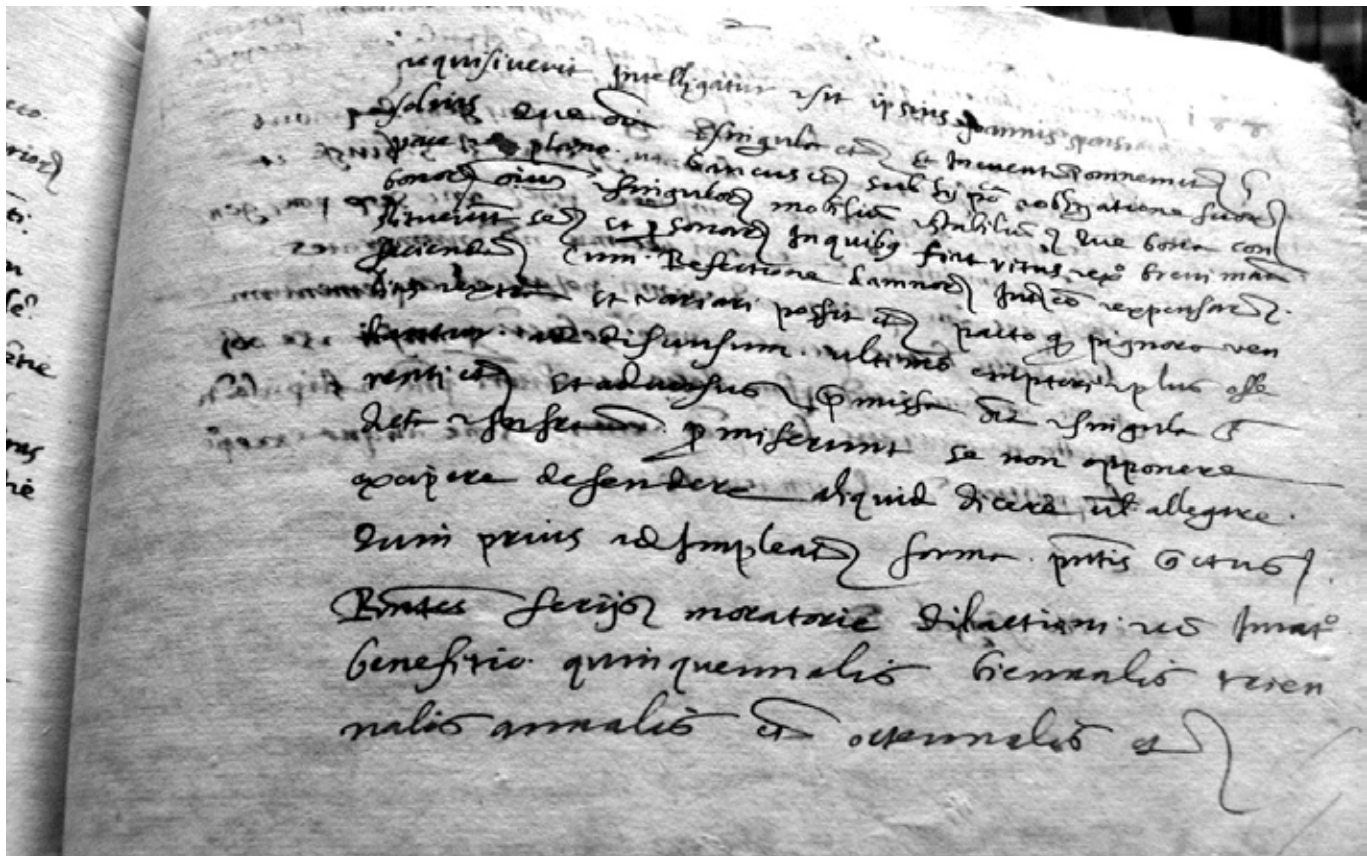
The ox seems to have been the main draught animal used for ploughing and ‘probably for treading the wheat out of the chaff in preparation for winnowing’ (Wettinger, 1982: 31). Horses were not as common and were mostly used for transportation. The highest price for a horse was fetched by one *pili sauri* sold by Raynelio Machnne to Pasquale Grima for the price of 9 *uncie* (NAV R287/4, f.131v [29.03.1567]) and another *pili rubei* bought by Joanne Cakie from Jacobo de Albano on 25 August 1568 also for 9 *uncie* (NAV R287/4, f.246v). The lowest price paid was for a horse *pili falbi* sold for 4 *uncie* 12 *tareni* by Joanne Grima, *Melitensis habitator huius terra et insule Gaudisii*, to Leonardo Vassallo, a Maltese living with Grima (NAV R287/4, f.69r [18.11.1567]). As for oxen the prices were very similar.

The donkey and its hybrid, the mule were “indispensable animals in production and transportation” (Dalli, 2005: 1) and have been,

since time immemorial, associated with such hard work. This is especially so in the smaller Mediterranean islands like Pantelleria, Malta and Gozo, where these animals were indispensable for farming. These smaller islands came to be “natural donkey sanctuaries” (Dalli, 2005: 2) where the donkey developed unique characteristics. Braudel (1995: 226) described the donkey as ‘the symbol of everyday life in the Mediterranean’. In Malta and Gozo idioms like *bħall-ħmar tas-sienja* and *jaħdem daqs baħħal* came to show both the hard work which donkeys and mules did everyday as well as the close relationship between the Maltese peasant and these beasts (Cassar, 1996: 13). Mules and donkeys were the commonest means of transport available and the Maltese donkey in particular was said to be so good that it did not need horse shoes. Mules were particularly in demand for driving the mills that ground the wheat and barley before the introduction of windmills. In Malta donkeys and mules were reared on a wide scale and managed to gain a very respectable reputation abroad, where they were exported, especially in Sicily.

In the records under review, the donkey and the mule occupy thirty percent of the whole animal occurrence. The donkeys were rather cheap especially when compared to oxen and horses. The highest price at which a donkey was sold is 6 *uncie*. This donkey *pili falbi* was sold by Vincentio Xuerib to Philipppo Fenec on 08 November 1566 (NAV R287/4, f.48r). The least expensive donkey was actually a she-ass *pili ferrantis* which Bendo Cumbo acquired from Mariano Micallef for 1 *uncie* 18 *tareni* (NAV R287/4, f.199v [31.07.1567]). For mules, the story is a bit different as their price tended to be quite high. The maximum amount fetched by a mule is that of 11 *uncie* 20 *tareni* in a contract drawn up on 18 June 1568. Blasio Chilia, a Maltese living in Gozo, sold a mule *pili castagni* to Petro Casha of Birkirkara (Birkirkara) for the mentioned price which was to be paid at Christmas (NAV R287/4, f.188r). Although the lowest price fetched by a mule is 5 *uncie*, only one other mule fetched a similar price as all the others were sold for more than 7 *uncie*.

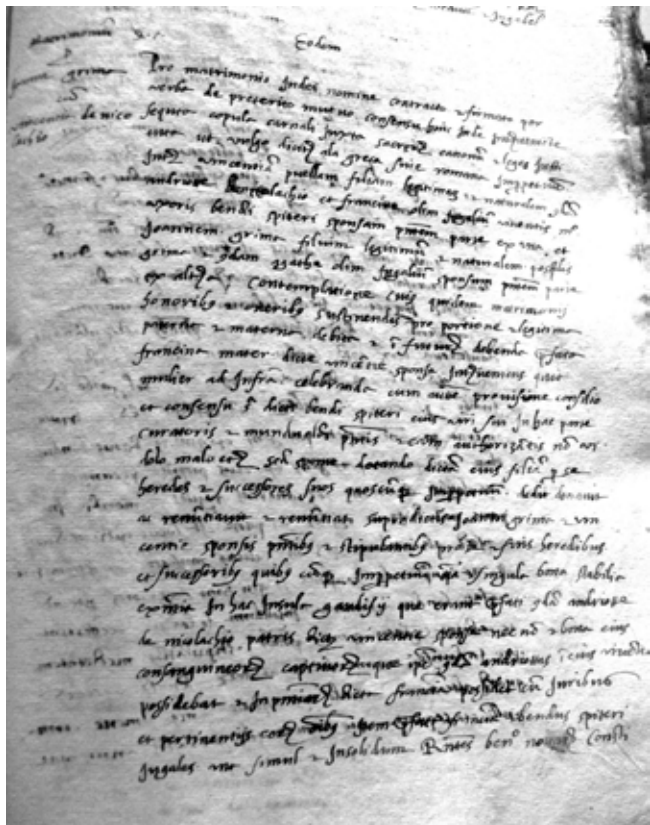
As can be expected from an agricultural community, the ownership of cattle was widespread, however according to Wettinger, some landowners together with notaries, lawyers, priests, and other better-



NAV R287/4, f.188r

off persons, had a pre-eminent status among the dealers in cattle (Wettinger, 1982: 36). Though not necessarily the case, Magnificus Antonio Plathamone is one person who features in two contracts of lease of quite large amounts of cattle. In the first instance he leased out 89 head of cattle to Federico Caruana. This lease was to be for one year starting on the following 15 August at the price of 6 *tareni per pecude* (NAV R287/4, f.56v [30.10.1567]). He also rented out 80 head of cattle this time to Joannello Spiteri for also one year starting on the following 15 August for the same price of 6 *tareni per pecude* payable in instalments of one-third (NAV R287/4, f.213v [27.07.1568]).

The importance of animals in the everyday life of the people of the sixteenth century is further emphasised when looking at the dowries. Apart from a number of other things such as property, the newlyweds were frequently given animals from their parents as well. Joanne Grima, son of Pasqualis Grima and the late Agathe, and Vincentia de Nicolachio, daughter of the late Andriotte de Nicolachio and Francine, were given a large number of animals, apart from other things, such as a house and two store houses in the Castle of Gozo. The animals given from the bride's parents



NAV R287/4, f.186r [11.06.1568]

included three bulls, two cows, a cow with its young, one she-ass with its young, one ass *pili ferrantis*, one ass *pili rubei*, two mules, five head of

cattle and one pig. They also got one bull *pili rubei aratorem*, and ten head of cattle, some of them pregnant (NAV R287/4, f.186r [11.06.1568]).

Land Ownership

With agriculture being the basis of sixteenth century economy, the major occupation was that of farming followed by the landowners and fief-holders who looked down on the peasants, considering it degrading to work the lands, and thus relied on the income from their estates for their livelihood. Unlike their Sicilian counterparts, where the land was almost entirely owned by the king, the feudal classes and the Church, many peasants in Malta were landholders. The lands of the peasants were small and generally each peasant would not have more than three or four fields. However this still gave them a superior status to the Sicilian farmers (Wettinger, 1982: 7). This superiority was however, only in terms of landownership as most Maltese lands were of poor quality. The people who did not own land or in the case of Gozo in the 1560s, the Maltese who went to live on the island of Gozo, were able to lease lands from the proprietors. Larger properties were usually let out in smaller portions to farmers themselves. In the records under review this is evident. Sometimes the number of parts in which the field was divided was given in the acts such as in the leasing out of one-fourth of a field by Joanne Grego to Dominico Tune for two years (NAV R287/4, f.41r [29.10.1566]).

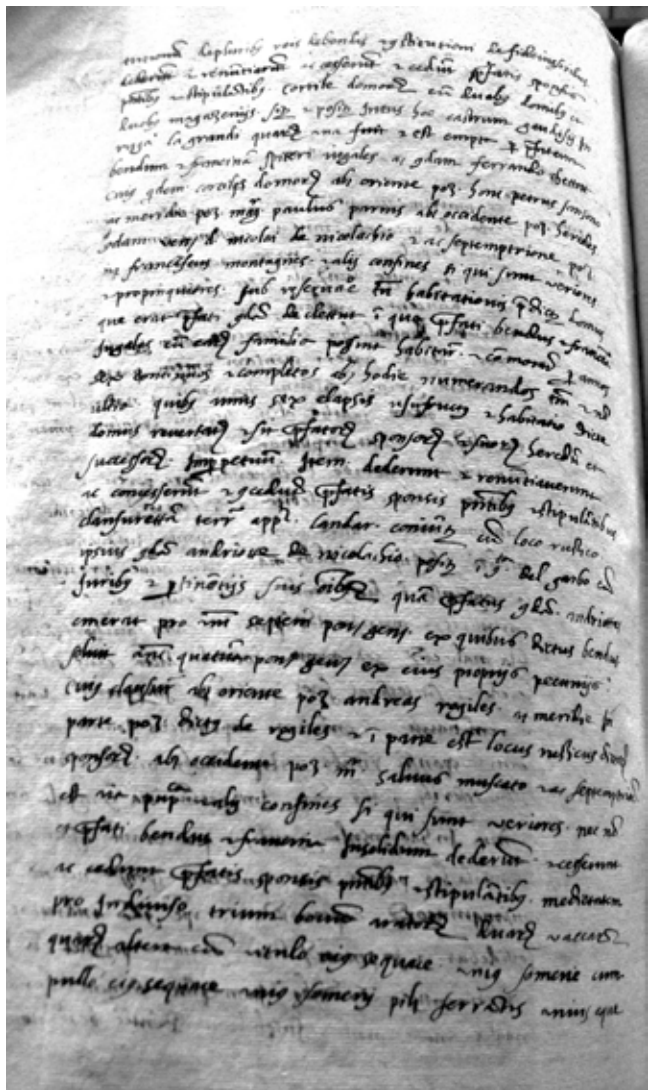
One can see transactions between the people who belonged to the more well-off families as well as between poorer families. Not only lands were leased out but also fountains, gardens, mills, and farmhouses. A case in point relates to Magnificus Matheo Falsono Secreto who on 19 October 1566 lent a fountain named *hainhabdum* (Għajn Habdun) to Dego de Joseppi for three years which started on the previous 15 August for 4 *uncie* per year (NAV R287/4, f.36r). The leasing of farmhouses, frequently with the surrounding lands, was a common occurrence as well. Such an instance is in a contract between Joanne Grima and Andreas Gatto. Grima leased out and gave in *gabella a locum rusticum* with its fields in Gozo in *ta samar* (Ta' Samar) for one year starting on

the day of the drawing up of the contract for the price of 3 *uncie* per year (NAV R287/4, f.242r [20.08.1568]), starting on the following 15 August. Greco was to pay 13 *salme* and 8 *tumini* of mixed grains per annum for this lease (NAV R287/4, f.204v [12.07.1568]).

Hiring of People and Clothing

The hiring of people to work in the agricultural sector was also quite a common occurrence. Some people were hired for the harvesting period or else for a number of years with the pay usually being a mixture of money, cereals as well as food and clothing. Sometimes the wages were very low such as when Raynelio Machnne hired Gozimo de Amore on 18 February 1567 for the period of grain harvesting he agreed to pay him 12 *tareni* for the whole period (NAV R287/4, f.91r). However, there were better wages such as the hiring of Francisco Sammut, a Maltese, by Joanne Theobaldo, a Gozitan for three months starting on the day of the drawing up of the contract for the price of 16 *tareni* per month and the necessary drink (NAV R287/4, f.179r [30.06.1567]).

The acts under study contain few references to the sale of textiles and clothing between the local people. These acts describe clothing items which were decorated and which seemed to have pertained to the upper class of society who saw fashion as a sign of their social status. The transactions encountered are on a small scale usually with only one item sold. This is the case of a contract drawn up on 27 March 1567. Guarino de Plathamone sold to Josephus Rapa a women's mantle of common cloth, decorated with griffons and with a silver fastening for 6 *uncie* 16 *tareni* payable on the following 1 August (NAV R287/4, f.124v). Similarly, Jacobo Imbrogl of Gudie (Gudja) sold a dress of scarlet cloth decorated with five strips of black velvet and with decorated sleeves to Angelo Tabuni, of Siggiewi but living in Gozo, for 4 *uncie* (NAV R287/4, f.219r [28.08.1567]). The only exception is a contract of *debitum* in which Francisco Grima declares that he owes Joanne Sammut of Naxaro (Naxxar) 3 *uncie* 18 *tareni* for 12 *palme* of black coloured cloth (NAV R287/4, f.186r [17.07.1567]).



NAV R287/4, f.186v

Corsairing Activities

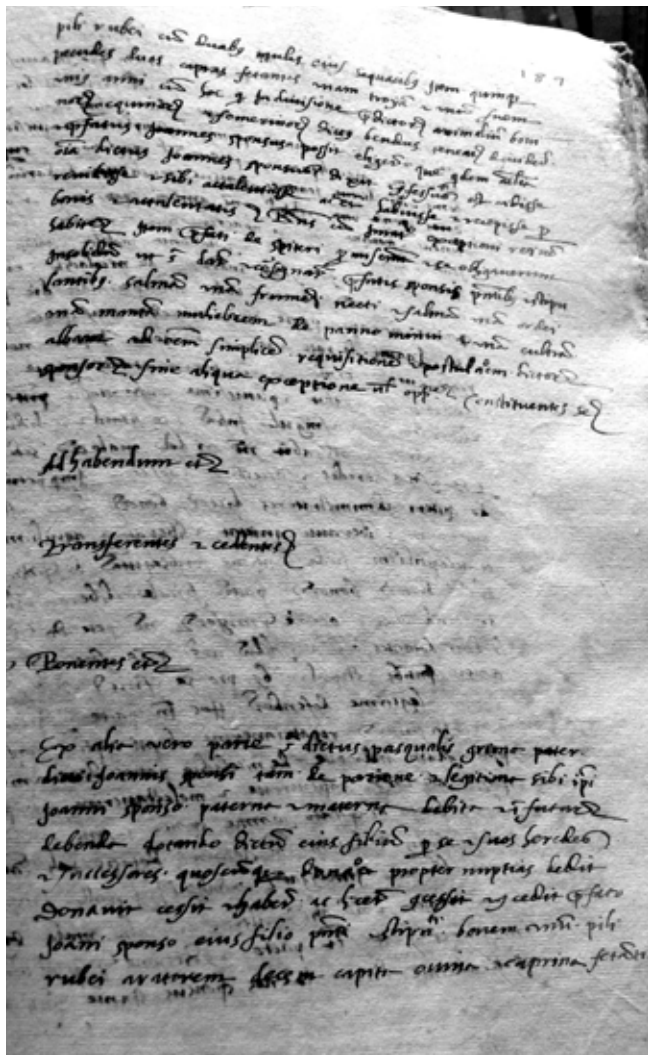
With the Maltese islands being surrounded by sea, there is no doubt that this body of water played a very important part in the life of the islanders. This is especially so with the arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta. During the sixteenth century, the Knights were involved, along with other Christian forces, in attacks directed at the Ottoman Empire as well as in the protection of Tripoli. The Knights had their galleys with characteristics that were ‘most suitable for the war of corsairs’ (Bono, 1993: 377). Thousands of Maltese people were employed on board these galleys and sailing ships of the Order with various kinds of duties (Bono, 1993: 384-5). Apart from working with the Order on the ships and in the dockyard, some Maltese had their own ships which they used both for trade as well as for corsairing purposes. The latter was done either through a formal declaration or by the

obtaining of letters of marque which authorised privateering expeditions in a private capacity (Bono, 1993: 388-389). Malta had a base for privateering expeditions and this attracted both Maltese and foreigners who practised the *corso* according to rules set out by the Order.

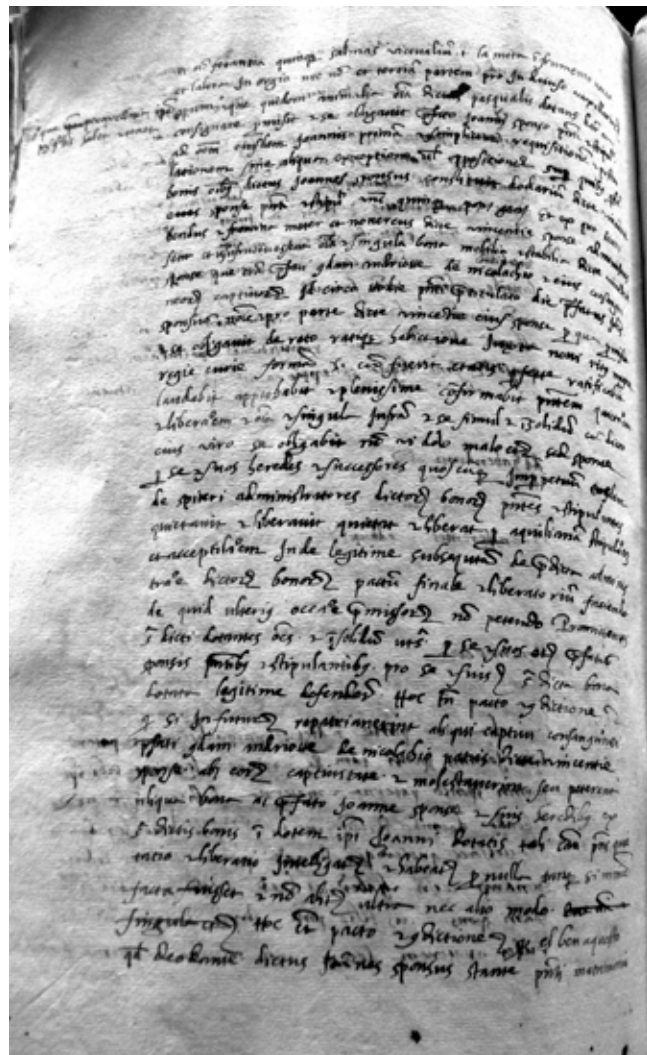
The records under review do not contain much reference to corsairing however there is an instance where a short narrative is available of what happened to Martin Mule who found himself the target of Muslim corsairing. In a contract drawn up on 20 July 1568, Johannes Haius, called *galtir*, of Gozo reported that a few days before, his partner Martin Mule had left the bay of Marsalfurn (Marsalforn) on a *fregata* named Santa Maria del Soccorso (del Securso) carrying fifteen hinnies of horses and asses, as well as two mules, for the Magnifico Antonio de Mazara, with the licence to export these animals. His final destination was to be Pozzallo but while they were on high sea, they met pirate galleys of the enemy. The patron of the ship escaped with the sailors on board the *scaffa* of the frigate leaving the frigate with the passengers on board in the bay of Cala di lo Corbo. However, the patron and the crew were captured by the enemy. The court of Gozo, thus, authorised Johannes Haius to act in order to recover the ship and redeem his partner who was held captive. In the contract, in front of notary Tomaso Gauci, Haius authorised Joannis Refalo as his procurator with full rights to go to Sicily and do whatever was necessary in order to try and recover the said ship and to liberate the said Martin Mule from captivity (NAV R287/4, f.208r).

Sale of Ships

Another aspect of this seafaring side of the Maltese and Gozitans is seen in the sale of ships or shares in ships. One instance is the sale related to the previous contract. This is the sale of one-half of a frigate together with its *fragatina* armed with all the sails and furnishing needed to travel and which was at the time moored in the harbour of Malta by Johannes Haius to Martino Mule on 18 June 1568. This price was that of 103 gold *scudi* and 2 *tareni* which was to be paid in a year from the drawing up of the contract. The sale was done on the condition that whatever income was



NAV R287/4, f.187r



NAV R287/4, f.187v

made through the freight of the ship during this year was taken by Johannes while he was bound to safeguard the price to be paid by Martin Mule, the buyer (NAV R287/4, f.208r).

Conclusion

Gozo in the mid-sixteenth century, as can be seen from the acts of notary Tomaso Gauci, was trying to rebuild itself from the devastation which fell upon it in 1551. Things moved slowly but steadily and almost fifteen years after this disastrous event one can see that the daily momentum was being restored.

The Gozitan society was one based on agriculture and land appears to have been the most important asset in such a society. One can see people from Malta, Gozo and Sicily mingling together and involving themselves in various contracts. The

population was divided between the landowning nobility and the peasants. However, unlike the rest of Europe, these were not cut off from each other and were frequently involved in the different kinds of transactions. The nobles were also involved in the importation of wheat from Sicily and in the corso which, when successful, yielded huge profits.

All this is known thanks to the notarial records which enable the historian to see beyond the general activities which took place on the island and help one focus on the lives of specific people in a particular place and time through the contract which they drew up in front of the notary. Furthermore, these records enable the researcher to see the basic procedures of contracts and also to discover certain unique events which happened in the lives of people during the sixteenth century in Gozo.

References

- Bonello, G. (2013). "Del Rosso's description of Malta in 1566." In *The Sunday Times* (6 May 2012). Available at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120506/life-features/Del-Rosso-s-description-of-Malta-in-1566.418641> (Accessed 16/02/2013).
- Bono, S. (1993). "Naval Exploits and Privateering." In Mallia Milanese, V. (ed) *Hospitaller Malta- Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*. Malta: Mireva Publications Limited: 377.
- Braudel, F. (1995). *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Volume II*. London: University of California Press.
- Camilleri, A. (1996). "Some Notes on the History of Gozo and its Old City under the Knights of St. John." In Farrugia, J. and Briguglio, L. (eds) *Focus on Gozo*. Malta: Formatek Ltd.
- Cassar, C. (1996). "U Mulu di Malta: The Maltese Trade in Donkeys and Mules." In Frenzo, H. (ed) *L-Istorja ta' Malta*. Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin.
- Cutajar, D. and Cassar, C. (2005). "Malta and the sixteenth century struggle for the Mediterranean." In Cassar, G. *The Great Siege 1565, Separating fact from fiction*. Malta: Sacra Militia Foundation.
- Dalli C. (2005). *The Rise and Fall of the Donkey: the Central Mediterranean Islands*. Presented at the conference "The Role of the Donkey and Mule in the Culture of the Mediterranean." Greece: Island of Hydra: 7-10 October 2005.
- D'Autun, J. Q. (1536). *The Earliest Description of Malta*. Translation and notes by Vella, H. C. R. (1980). Malta: DeBono Enterprises.
- Kamen, H. (1971). *The Iron Century: Social Change in Europe 1550-1660*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Mallia-Milanes, V. (1993). "Introduction to Hospitaller Malta." In Mallia-Milanes, V. (ed) *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798*. Malta: Mireva Publications Limited.
- Spiteri, S. C. (2005). *The Great Siege: Knights vs Turks mdxv, Anatomy of a Hospitaller Victory*. Malta: Gutenberg Press.
- Wettinger, G. (1982). "Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages." In Buhagiar, M. (ed) *Proceedings of History Week*. Malta: Historical Society.

Mariana Grech possesses a Bachelor's degree with honours and a PGCE in history. She is currently a history teacher at St Jeanne Antide College Immaculate Conception School.