

The Lore of Turkish Raids on Gozo

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Introduction

Turkish raids and incursions in Gozo are no mythical fabrication. Turks used to attack and invade Gozo very frequently. To our forefathers they were a veritable scourge. That is why our ancestors eventually built inland watch-towers and coastal redoubts, trenches and towers overlooking the main bays and inlets of the island.

However, and unfortunately, the folk traditions regarding these fortifications are rather scanty – this of course with the exception of the Citadel. The lore of the Turkish raids on Gozo is nonetheless quite rich. In fact we do have quite a good number of legends and other stories about the times when our island was subjected to frequent raids and incursions by Turkish marauders, corsairs, pirates and other intruders who always considered Gozo an easy prey to their whims.

Who were the Turks?

In the first place, who were the Turks who frequently attacked Gozo? Most probably these were Barbary and North African Arabs. They spoke Arabic not Turkish. Some of them might

have been of central African stock. That is why traditionally Maltese and Gozitans thought that the Turks were dark-skinned.

Prior to the coming of the Knights in 1530, the Gozo *Universitas* had its own *Dejma*, a sort of constant coast guard that kept watch from certain sites or promontories near the coast known as *l-Ghassa tal-Mahrag*. Fortunately for Gozitans a large part of Gozo's coastline consists of very high cliffs (*sisien*) from where our island is inaccessible from the sea. But then we have the bays, inlets and the north-eastern slanting hill-sides (*irdumijiet*) which are accessible and from where usually the pirates and Turkish marauders used to attack Gozo.

Traditional toponyms indicating a guard-post or watch-post remind us where a coast guard was kept. Names as *Il-Wardija* and *Tal-Ghassa*, lands overlooking the North Comino Channel near Hondoq ir-Rummien, remind us that in the past constant watch was kept from these places. Even the word Qala (*Qalgħa* with diminutive *Qlejgħa*), in my opinion, does not mean a bay or an inlet but a small fortification. Most probably this fortification was built on a piece of land jutting out near the modern Qala Belvedere on the left-hand side and overlooking the low lands below.



Cliffs along the southern coast of Gozo.

Another *wardija* or watch-post was sited at Ras il-Wardija or the south-western tip of Gozo known also as Kap Bumbarda, the Bombard Headland, by our fishermen. At Ras il-Wardija there is a hillock of solid rock on which there was a small room and even a cistern to provide water for the guards who were on duty there, day and night.

In spite of everything, Turkish marauders landed on Gozo many a time. Frequently they did this not only to lay waste the countryside, but also to take water. Gozo's natural springs were known to the Turkish seafarers and were fully utilised to satisfy their requirements. Undoubtedly Gozo's natural springs provided excellent potable water.

Ghajn Barrani, (the Foreigner's Spring), at Xaghra is one such site. Both Dragut and Rajjes Murat used to take water from this spring. Here we also find a large rock or boulder under which the Turkish corsair Dragut used to rest when he landed on Gozo, known as Il-Ħaġra ta' Dragut (Dragut's Stone).

Legends about the Turks

Concerning Ghajn Barrani, another legend recounts how once a Captain of a Turkish galley sent one of his seamen, named Dirghut, to get a bunch of grapes from a nearby field. The unfortunate fellow was caught red-handed and in a hurry took the bunch of grapes along with a substantial part of the vine twig on which it was

growing. For Muslims, maltreating the vine is a sacrilege. According to this legend, Dirghut was punished for his misdeed as he was burnt alive on the rock that still bears his name.

Another water spring with Turkish connections is found near San Blas (St. Blaise), called Ghajn Nahrit or Nahrin (Nahrin's Spring). Near this spring there was a small water reservoir. Legend has it that this was built by the Turks themselves to make it easier for them to take water from this spring.

Dahlet Qorrot may have been named after the Turkish captain (*rajjes*) who landed there to take water from Ghajn Berta (Berta's Spring). The springs at Mgarr and Ghajnsielem also served as a great attraction for the Turks. One of these springs is named Ghajn ir-Rajjes (the Captain's Spring), most probably because it was preferred by the Turkish Chieftain for its exceptionally good water.

The landing of Turks on Gozo is also commemorated by two large natural pits in rocks



Ghajn Barrani.

known as Il-Hofra tat-Torok (The Hole of the Turks). One is found at Wied l-Infern (The Valley of Hell), near Qbajjar Bay. The other one is found at Wied il-Għasri (Għasri Valley). Most probably these hewn large rock cavities served as hiding places for the Turkish invaders.

That the Turks invaded Gozo from these parts of the island is also attested by the legend of Our Lady of Żebbuġ who is said to have been seen throwing stones at the Turks to make them go back to the sea from where they had come.

The Turks and corsairs did not land on Gozo simply to take water. Many a time they pillaged Rabat and the villages and laid waste to the countryside. Mgr Pietro Dusina's report of the Apostolic Visit of 1575 is full of references to Turkish incursions concerning the missing wooden doors of chapels and documentation regarding the clergy. The abduction of Gozitans was also very frequent and the Gozitan legendary folklore in this regard is very rich.

The most famous legend is that of St Demetrius and Żguga or Żgugina. Żgugina lived at Hotbet il-Għajn (the Spring Hillock), north-west of Għarb. The ruins of her house and her cistern are still visible. Other ruins are known as Ta' Mazzara and Ta' Luċija, beyond the present Church of St Demetrius. Żgugina's only hope in life was her son and that is why she was so upset when her only son was taken away from her by the Turks.

The Turkish galley that approached Gozo was a Xellandia. It anchored in a small inlet in the vicinity of Żgugina's house known as Ta' Travsini. On that day her son, Matthew, was taking care of the goats and the chickens while his mother was washing the clothes at the spring. The Turkish pirates robbed the church of St Demetrius, but the Gozitan farmers soon noticed their presence and gave the alarm. Confusion ensued, and while the Gozitans were in disarray, Żgugina's son was taken away by the Turks. They carried him on their shoulders. When Żgugina returned home she found out that her son was missing. She was sure that the Turks had taken him away. She started screaming and crying, but it was all in vain. She

even ran to the coast crying for her son, but the Turkish corsairs simply jeered at her. Therefore she went to seek help from St Demetrius at his chapel. The rhyming quatrain is well known:

*San Dimitri, ġibli 'l ibni
ħa nixġhellek qasba żejt,
nixġhelhielek minn filġħodu
u ddum tixġhel sa billejl.*

Translation:

O St Demetrius bring to me back my son,
then I will light a measure of oil for you,
I will light it up from morning
and it will shine on through the night.

According to this legend, St Demetrius came out of the titular painting and off he went on his horse towards the horizon where the Xellandia was. When St Demetrius arrived on the galley, Żgugina's son, Matthew, was already serving the captain with a cup of coffee. The saint took hold of the boy, put him on horseback, in front of him, and carried him back to Gozo. The boy was very tired, and as they rode back, he rested his head on the Saint's breastplate. One can see this in the present titular painting of the chapel. When Żgugina saw that St Demetrius had brought back her son, she kept her word, and lit a measure of oil in front of the titular painting.



The chappel of St Demetrius.

Some natural footprints on the rocks are also attributed to the hooves of the horse of St Demetrius. St Demetrius' feastday on 8th October signifies the closure of the navigation period which opens again on St. George's day, the 23rd of April. Both Saints are seen riding a horse.

The patron saint of people abducted by the Turks is St Leonard, and in fact a chapel dedicated to St Leonard existed near the ruins of the house of Dun Zrafa and Dun Biżrumpawl, overlooking the valley. Two girls were abducted by the Turks from near it-Taraġ tal-Bniet (the Girls' Steps). These steps are still there on a rock face on the way to Dwejra where they used to serve as a shortcut for people going down to Dwejra. There is also a large, deep pit where, it is said, the Turks hid the girls while they were pillaging the countryside nearby. According to legend, other girls were abducted from L-Ghadira ta' Sarraflu, (Sarraflu's Pool), and were never seen again in Gozo.

Another legend states that the niche of Our Lady of Angels, which can still be found in Marsalforn Street, Xagħra, was built by a Gozitan named Indri, nicknamed Lindju. Lindju was abducted while he was watching his threshing floor (*l-Andar*), and was taken on board a Turkish galley which was anchored at Ghajn Barrani, not far away.

More interesting is the Legend of Jassu (Yassu). A Turkish corsair was once left stranded on Gozo and was being followed by Gozitan guards. To escape them, the Turkish corsair entered an alley in Għarb, where he found an open door which he entered and hid in the cellar of the house. The house belonged to Clement Cassar who was a cotton merchant. At night the Turkish corsair would leave the house and go to the coast to see whether he could get a glimpse of a Turkish galley. Clement and his wife used to go out to go to church to hear mass early in the morning. During the time the house was empty, the Turkish corsair would go to the kitchen and look for food which was always plentiful in Clement's house. After quite a long time, the Turks raided Gozo again, and the Turkish corsair managed to join the raiders and make his way back home.

Clement Cassar knew nothing of what had been going on at his house. It so happened that after some time Clement Cassar was caught and taken into slavery at Bona in North Africa. He was taken to the slave market for sale where it so happened that the Turkish corsair who used to hide in his house recognised him, and bought him. Clement Cassar started imploring his new master: *Jassieheb, Jassieheb, eħlisni mill-jasar!* (O comrade, free me from slavery!) The Turkish corsair told him the story of his stay on Gozo, and that he had bought him for no other reason except to free him as a sign of gratitude for having lived in his house all that time. Because he used to cry out *Jassieheb*, he was nicknamed Jassu.

There is another legend connected with the House at Lunzjata which recounts that a Turk once entered the house and hid himself underneath the bed. A sister and brother lived in this house and while the brother was working in the fields not very far away, his sister was at home and noticed that there was someone under the bed. She was afraid to call out to her brother. So she pretended to sing:

*Hajta hajta twila twila,
Nagħmel qmis lil Żeppu ħija.*

(A long, long thread,
With which I will make a shirt for my brother Joseph.)

When she sang the words *Żeppu ħija* (my brother Joseph), she cried out with all her might so that her brother would hear her calling. In fact he did hear her and when he arrived home she told him that there was someone under the bed. The hidden Turk received what he deserved.

Sometimes a mistake on the part of the Gozitans was fatal. A Turkish galley once anchored near Mgarr and the Turks disembarked in order to get water. The Turks landed without any trouble because the Gozitan farmers, who were in the surrounding fields, went to hide in a nearby cave. They closed the entrance with a rubble wall and intended to stay there until the Turks sailed away but they had forgotten to take their dog with them. The Turks were laying waste to the

countryside and were looking for people to carry off into slavery. The forgotten dog went looking for his master who was hiding in the cave. The Turks noticed the dog barking near the wall and went to see what the matter was where they soon realised that there were people hiding behind it. The poor Gozitan farmers were soon caught and taken on board the Turkish galley.

It is said that on another occasion, the Turks landed at Xlendi. It was at night in summer. They were very thirsty and wanted to drink. It appears that they knew the place quite well, as they went up the valley until they reached the great spring of water, known locally as Gran Fontana or il-Ghajn il-Kbira (the Great Spring).

They reached the Great Spring, and drank as much water as they wanted. But as they were very tired, and it was summer, they decided to sleep near the fountain. Early in the morning the next day they were spotted by a Gozitan patrol and taken prisoners.

The legend of Ghajn Abdul states that there was a Turkish captain (*rajjes*) who was caught by the Gozitans and who was sentenced to die of thirst and hunger. He was thrown into a pit where he scratched the soil until water gushed out. Abdul was so thirsty that he drank and drank until his stomach burst, and died. Abdul had found a new spring which was called after him Abdul's Spring and is still there to this very day.

Other unlucky incidents for the Turks are indicated by the legend of the Bakery at Marsalforn, the Bakery of Ta' Mulejja, at Qala, and the Legend of Kanċla. Kanċla's Hill is a small hillock near Ta' Ġordan Hill.

More or less these three legends are variants of the same legend. A Turk tries to carry away a girl who was kneading flour to make bread. The quick witted girl (or woman, in the case of Kangla) suddenly throws the semi-liquid material at his face and nearly blinds him. The Turk is taken by surprise and by the time he is well again, the girl disappears, and so she escapes from his grip.

The Siege of Gozo, 1551

As is well known know Gozo's greatest disaster following a Turkish attack was the Siege of Gozo of 1551.

According to legend, when Dragut's brother was killed in Gozo in 1544, he asked for his brother's dead body so that he could give him a decent burial. The Gozitans not only refused to give the body to him, but they burned it in front of Dragut's eyes in a place now occupied by St John's demi-bastion.

It is said that when the Turks boarded their galleys to leave Gozo, Dragut went up on a large rock known as il-Ġebbla tal-Halfa (the Vow's Rock), near Ras il-Qala, and there he vowed to come back and destroy the people of Gozo.

In 1551 he came back and laid siege of Mdina, but when the people of Malta took out the Statue of St. Agatha on the bastions of Mdina, he remembered his vow, brought the Mdina siege to an end and sailed off to attack Gozo.

When the Gozitans realised that they could be attacked, they tried to send their women and



Il-Ġebbla tal-Halfa.

children to Malta to take shelter behind the fortifications of Birgu. In fact some Gozitan boats full of refugees reached the Grand Harbour. But Grand Master Juan D'Omedes was very cruel. He not only turned them back but threatened to drown them there if they refused to go back. His excuse was that Gozitan soldiers fought better if they had their wives beside them!

The Gozitans also tried to hide all their precious objects. We have the legend of the Zebbug bell which was hidden somewhere but never found again and also the legend of the hidden treasure of the principal church of Gozo. According to legend all the precious objects of this Church were hidden in a tomb, and a wooden cross was put on top of the buried treasure as a sign marking the place of the hidden precious objects. However, as most Gozitans were taken into slavery, the treasure was never found again and it is still hidden. This tomb was not in the present church, but in the old one that existed prior to 1700.

However, in this regard, it is to be noted that according to the inventory attached to Mgr Pietro Dusina's Report of 1575, many objects listed there are those coming down from the time prior to 1551. So the Turks did not carry away everything, after all, and some objects were hidden and retrieved safely.

Between Gelmus and Ghasri there is a piece of land, a large plain, known as Misraħ it-Torok or il-Misraħ tat-Torok. According to tradition, those Turkish soldiers who were not on duty while besieging the Castle, used to camp there to have their rest.

In July 1551, a Turkish naval force under the command of Sinan Pasha invaded Gozo. The Turks attacked the Gozo Citadel, commanded by Galitan de Sesse. The story of Bernardo de Opus, who, during this attack killed his wife and two daughters, is well known. Bernardo knew that the Citadel could not withstand the Turkish bombardments for long. When de Sesse attempted to negotiate a surrender, he, and the egoistic Gozitan negotiators, were outwitted by Sinan Pasha, and were soon to fall into slavery.

The Turks laid waste the principal church of the Citadel and stole everything they set their eyes on. What they could not carry with them, they set on fire.

Now when the Grand Castle surrendered, the Gozitans were marched off to Mgarr to be boarded on the Turkish Fleet. Gozitan noblemen and the richer personalities had to carry all their precious belongings with them to Mgarr.

Not all Gozitans were taken into slavery. According to tradition many young men climbed down the walls of the Citadel and escaped to the countryside.

There are various legends associated with these Turkish invasions. One legend says that the Gozitan captives were taken to Ras in-Newwiela. This legend says that the Gozitans were boarded on the Turkish fleet from this promontory, as the Turks cried out: 'Hand me a dog, hand me a bitch!' Now Ras in-Newwiela is not found on the side of Mgarr ix-Xini Tower, but on the Ta' Ċenċ side. It is a very high and inaccessible promontory. It appears that the name predates 1551. So it is only a legend.

Where were Gozitans taken when the Turkish fleet sailed away? There is a legend which says that they were taken to Tarhuna, a town in north Africa. But most probably the majority were taken to the slave market at Constantinople. St. George's Parish Priest Don Lorenzo de Apapis was at Constantinople, from where he was redeemed. Several Gozitans were also redeemed. But according to another legend some Gozitan young girls managed to marry rich Turkish husbands and did not want to return back when redeemed.

When other Gozitans were redeemed, there were many disputes on lands and other properties in Gozo being claimed by many different owners. But that is another long story.

Reminiscences of the Turks

Until very recently Gozitan parents used to frighten their children that in wells, cellars and lonely places there were Turks lurking and used to warn



Ras in-Newwiela.

their dear ones not to approach such dangerous places “*għax jiġi Tork għalik, jieħdok u jagħmlek lakumja!*” (because a hiding Turk will come out for you, grabs you up and will turn your flesh into Turkish delight!)

Old farmhouses were built in such a way that there were no big windows on the façade but only a very small window high up and inaccessible from outside. Certain houses had a peephole or *kixxifejra* so that the owner could see from inside who was knocking at the door.

In larger houses and palaces, there was a statue of *It-Tork tat-Taraġ* (the statue of a Turk on the staircase) to remind children to be always on the alert about meeting a Turk who could take children away to Barbary.

Farmers used to make the scarecrows in the likeness of a Turk and used to call it *Tork it-Tiben* (a Turk made of straw.)

A man or a woman with dark skin was usually referred to as “*qisu Tork*” or “*qisha Tork*” (resembling a Turk).

When trouble suddenly crops up or when some misfortune befalls someone, you would surely hear such an expression as “*U t-Torok! Ara xi ġrali!*” (By the Turks! Look what happened to me!)

Until before the second World War (1939-45) north African Arabs used to come to Malta and Gozo

selling *ħabb għażiż* (earth almonds or edible rush-nuts *Cyperus esculentus*) and *xi ħasira*, (a mat or a curtain made of rushes.) These Arabs were referred to as Turks.

Now both *ħabb għażiż* and *ħasira* are semitic nouns common to both Arabic and Maltese and have nothing to do with the Turkish language. Turkish is an Altaic Language that is, a language that makes grammatical inflections and accretions by agglutinating suffixes to a root stem. I managed to find only one word in Maltese derived from Turkish, that is *ċamura* and *ċamur*, meaning the accumulated residue left after the polishing of newly made cement tiles. In Turkish *ċamur* means mud.

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that our traditions and legends refer to Turks and Turkish incursions, the actual ‘Turkish’ invaders and corsairs were not really Turks but north African Arabs whose language was very similar to Maltese and who, many a time, were people with dark skin unlike the real Turks who are mostly white-skinned and in appearance are very similar to the Maltese and Gozitan people.

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