

V.I.P. Treatment, Election Celebrations and Appointment Ceremonials in early 18th Century Gozo

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Introduction

Life in late 17th century Gozo took a positive twist. The threat of another major Ottoman assault looked appreciably remoter, and the Island's population rose again to pre-1551 levels (Fiorini S, 1996: 74-90). The Gozitans radiated out from centrally located Rabat and reclaimed the countryside as attested by the establishment of six rural parishes between 1678 and 1688.¹

Agriculture was by far the leading economic activity in insular Gozo and everyday life was dictated by its rhythmic cycle. Nonetheless, the Island had also a restricted, though clearly identifiable, circle of well educated and reasonably wealthy clerics, professionals and landlords (NLM, Lib. Ms. 142, Vol. VI, Fols. 247-8). A prominent member in this group was Dr. Giovanni Giuseppe Caxaro, a learned priest and an established judge. He served as Judge of Gozo from 1714 to 1720,² and as Head Juror of the Università during the years 1712, 1715-6, and 1719 respectively (Agius de Soldanis, Vol. I:137 – 156).

Caxaro is also the author of *Notizie del Gozo, e serie delli Giudici, e Giurati in detta Isola doppo la sorpresa della medesima con le cose piu rimarcabili*, preserved in manuscript form at the National Library of Malta (NLM, Lib. Ms. 142, Vol. VI, Fols. 170-258). Included in this early 18th century valuable corpus of information are brief chronicles of the Gozitan reaction vis-à-vis three extraordinary events, namely the visit by a Prince, the election of a Grand Master and the appointment of a Governor. Besides being highly amusing, these

short write-ups offer a few but interesting insights on the social and administrative set-up of the Island. Forthcoming is a free translation.

Vendosme's Visit (Fols. 215-8)

The Grand Prior of France Prince Philippe de Vendosme reached Gozo on Saturday 6th July 1715 at 3.00 pm. He was accompanied by the Bali` De Frenoy and seven Knights. Once landed, the distinguished visitors mounted on the horses made available to them and headed towards the *Convento delli Padri Francescani*³ in the limits of Rabat. Vendosme and his companions were saluted from *Torre Garza* and were escorted by the Island's cavalry under the joint leadership of the Governor's Lieutenant and a Juror from the Università.⁴

On reaching the lower end of the *Corsa dei Cavalli* (present day Republic Street) at Rabat, the Castello fired a twelve-shot salute. Further uphill at *Porta Reale*, Vendosme dismounted from his horse to meet the Governor Fra Didaco Garzia de Mula, the Head Juror and Judge Dr. Giovanni Giuseppe Caxaro, the remaining two Jurors, and a handful of other prominent civilians. Following this quick introduction, Vendosme mounted again on his horse and proceeded towards his destination. Meanwhile, the Governor, Jurors and entourage hurried to the Franciscan Friary from a different street for a second round of greetings, this time complemented by mortar firing, bell ringing and organ playing.

Having entered the Church, Vendosme was guided to a purposely set-up throne with damask upholstery and matching cushions, and after a few moments in prayer he was shown the way to his lodging. The Prince changed his clothes, walked back to the much cooler cloister, and accommodated himself

¹ These are Xewkija (1678), Gharb (1679), and Sannat, Xaghra, Xewkija and Zebbug (1688).

² Judging from Don. Giovanni Maria Camilleri (founder of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist and St. Anthony of Padova – later renamed as the Gozo Hospital) and Dr. Giuseppe Cassar (accused of purchasing and hiding the golden calf allegedly discovered by a peasant at Ta' Gelmus), the wealthy class in Gozo earned substantial incomes from the renting out of properties and from loans. NLM, Lib. Ms. 384, Fols. 1-2.

³ Several of the distinguished guests that visited Gozo at the time resided in this Friary.

⁴ The Università was the regional administrative body for Gozo under the Order of the Knights of St. John. Besides overall governance, its responsibilities included the upkeep of the Island's infrastructure and coastal defences.

on a cosy chair to receive the gifts of the Governor and of the Università` respectively. The Governor presented seven dead pheasants, twelve hens, twelve turkeys, twenty-four pigeons and twenty-four younger fowls, while the Università` donated a calf, two rams, twelve turkeys, twelve hens and twenty-four younger fowls. On his part, Vendosme gave a cash donation of two *doppie* to each of the two servants who delivered the said gifts.

The main purpose of Vendosme's trip to Gozo was to assess the Island's fortifications,⁵ and his visit to the Gran Castello turned out to be a golden opportunity for the staging of another symbolic ceremony synonymous with V.I.P. treatment. The Governor welcomed the Prince on the narrow bridge just outside the main gate and presented him the Castello's keys. Likewise, in the eventuality that he decided to visit the towers of *Mars 'ilforno*, *Dueira* and *Scilendi*, the *Comandante dell'Artiglieria* instructed the *Capi Mastri* to salute the distinguished guest with five, three and two shots respectively.

During his one-week stay, Vendosme and his companions surveyed all extant fortifications on the Island, and advised the Order to strengthen the coastal defences with the construction of five new batteries or redoubts.⁶ These were to be surrounded by a ditch and equipped with a garrison room and a gunpowder magazine, and were to be sited at *Colla il baida* (one on each side of the peninsula), two at *Mars 'ilforno* (at the centre of the bay and at the back of S. Paul's church respectively), and another at the centre of *Porto della Ramla*. Besides, the two batteries constructed by the Bali Iradano Geronda at Ramla (left) and at Marsalforn (S. Mary Point) were to be enhanced with the excavation of a surrounding ditch and the construction of a garrison room and a gunpowder magazine. The proposed works were entrusted to *Mastro Domenico Azzupardi Castellano della Torre di Mars 'ilforno*.⁷

⁵ The Maltese Islands were overtaken by strong rumours of another Turkish attack and the Gozitan fortifications were evaluated first by Bali Iradano Gironda and eventually by Prince Philippe de Vendosme.

⁶ Generally speaking, batteries consist of circular, semicircular, star-shaped or rectangular low-lying structures situated on peninsular sites where it was possible for the artillery to cover a wide area. Redoubts were smaller buildings of obtuse angled shape sited on beaches to offer frontal fire only.

⁷ The payment terms were: 4-palm thick free standing walls @ 3 scudi per canna; abutting walls @ 4 scudi per canna cube; 1-canna thick free standing walls @ 5 scudi per canna; excavation works @ 8 tari per canna cube (if the bedrock turned out to be too hard, the stipulated fee was subject to revision); roofing arches to be agreed upon; roofing slabs @ 10 tari per canna; flooring slabs @ 1 scudo per canna.

Philippe de Vendosme left Gozo the following Saturday. He departed from St. Francis Friary at 6.00 am and received a twelve-shot salute from the Castello. The Prince, however, opted to proceed towards Mgarr without the escort of the Island's cavalry.

Zondadari's Election (Fol. 251)

Grand Master Ramon Perellos y Roccaful whose last will allocated a generous sum of 500 scudi for distribution amongst the Gozitans living in poverty, passed away on Wednesday 10th January 1720 at 9.30 am. Three days later the Order elected as his successor, 64th Grandmaster and 23rd Prince of Malta and Gozo, the Bali Marcantonio Zondadari from the *Langue* of Italy.



Grand Master Marcantonio Zondadari.

The news reached Gozo that same day. Head Juror and Judge Giovanni Giuseppe Caxaro, who was also in command of the Island in the absence of the Governor Renato De Marbeuf, ordered the immediate firing of all mortars and of seven canons from the Castello. A replicate salute involving the firing of all muskets, seven large mortars and fifteen



A 1745 pen drawing by the Capuchin Friar L. Bartolo. Note the *scala* leading up from the *piazza del tocco* to the *Castello* and the Governor's residence next to the *Chiesa Collegiata* or *Matrice Chiesa*.

canons was executed in the evening from the same Castello. The latter was paid for by Caxaro himself, who financed also the lighting up of the facades of his private house and of the Governor's residence for three consecutive nights. The other Jurors and prominent citizens followed Caxaro's initiative and placed decorative lights on the windowsills of their homes during the same nights. Apparently, no celebrations of this scale were ever held on previous elections.

DeGuast Appointment (Fols. 252-3)

Fra Michele De Guast from the *Langue* of Provence was appointed Governor of Gozo by virtue of a Magistral Decree dated 22nd January 1720. His lieutenant, the novice knight de Maraghet, hailed from the same *Langue*. The new appointees reached Gozo the following February 1st, and were received at Mgarr by the Fiscal Juror Dr. Marcello Hellul Cardona and by the Island's Cavalry. De Guast was accommodated in a sedan chair and escorted to the *piazza del Tocco* at Rabat. Once there, more precisely at the foot of the *scala* leading up to the Castello, the new Governor and his Lieutenant made the acquaintance of the Head Juror and Judge

Dr. Caxaro, the remaining Jurors and all other prominent civilians gathered for the occasion. Caxaro and followers accompanied De Guast and de Margaplier to the *Palazzo Governatoriale*⁸ inside the Castello. The aforementioned Magistral Decree was read out by the Senior Notary and handed over to Caxaro, while De Guast was presented with the Castello's keys. Resultantly, the new Governor became effectively in possession of Gozo and its fortifications. The news was communicated to the rest of the Island via the firing of all muskets, seven large mortars and five canons from the Castello. Soon after, the new Governor and Lieutenant were ushered into the *Matrice Chiesa* to spend a few moments in prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

In the evening, Caxaro hosted a lavish dinner at the Governor's residence in honour of the new appointees. The other invitees were two Canons, the remaining Jurors, the Senior Notary, two Medical Doctors, and Monsignor l'Abbevuz (a Conventual Chaplin accompanying the new Governor).

⁸ The Palazzo Governatoriale was both the Governor's residence and the Castello's main armoury



Several of the distinguished guests that visited Gozo at the time resided at the *Convento delli Padri Francescani*.

A Generous Repayment

Caxaro's efforts to celebrate the election of Grand Master Zondadari and to offer a warm welcome to the new Governor of Gozo seem to have been greatly appreciated. He was eventually promoted to the post of Judge and Auditor of the Sea Consulate that same year, (NLM, Lib. Ms. 142, Vol. VI, Fol. 253), and died in Malta in 1742 (Agius De Soldanis, Vol. II, p 163).

References

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