

# THE ACTIVITIES OF THE FIRST KNOWN CAPUCHIN IN MALTA ROBERT OF EBOLI

by

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## Introductory Statement

A man's role in history depends on his own dynamism and on the circumstances wherein he exerts it.

The figure of *Father Robert of Eboli*, a Capuchin Friar, had distinguished itself so conspicuously, due to his apostolic zeal and activities spread out over a period when Malta was threatened by the Turkish Armada, when ultimately, the future of Europe was a question of whether the Ottomans were to take hold of the last western Christian Bulwark or not.

If one cannot write the History of Malta without tracing the Siege of 1565, similarly, no description of the Siege is adequate if two important persons are not dealt with. We are sufficiently informed about the first one, Grand Master Jean Parisot de La Valette, for there was hardly a single historian who was not interested in him; but on the second, the Capuchin monk, Robert of Eboli, very little has been written, notwithstanding the important part he played in that Siege: this, however, was not due to negligence, but rather to the lack of documents. The works of Mariano da Calitri, O.F.M. Cap. and of Galileo Salvatoriano, are interesting, but, as all other first studies, they are incomplete and not critical.

This study is an attempt to provide scientifically a clearer and more critical picture of Fr. Robert with special attention to what he performed in Malta during the Siege. It is not my intention to treat in full length the history of that Siege, but to refer to it occasionally when our subject demands it: a historical diagnosis of a man who lived four hundred years ago, can hardly put aside his historical background.

Most of the material used in this approach came from the earlier accounts of the Siege, like those of Cirni Corso, Balbi di Correggio, Bosio and Gentile di Vendome. Of these Cirni Corso and Balbi di Correggio are very reliable because they give us firsthand information: the former was very accurate in his investigation and went on the spot for personal knowledge and the latter was an eyewitness and fought in Malta. Bosio, as an official historian of the Order of the Knights, is by far the best and the completest and deserves much credit.

An open letter of the Grand Master La Valette to Fr. Robert of Eboli, conserved in the Archives of the Knights at the Royal Malta Library brings Fr. Robert's activities clearly to view. Manuscripts in the Capuchin Provincial

R A T O Johannes de Valletta 27 Venerabilis et singularis patris nostris fratri nostris lecturis et  
 auditoris sala Notum facimus et in verbo veritatis asseritur come il Rdo Padre fra Roberto  
 de Eboli dell'ordine di capocioni ha predicato qui in malta nella nra Chiesa conventuale per tutto  
 il spazio della quadagesima ultima passata, et molte volte si avanti come dappoi di quella con  
 ogni sincerità, et mantenimento della fede catholica, con buona, christiana, salutifera, canonica,  
 et ecclesiastica dottrina, et con ogni virtuoso esempio et moderata vita, et non solamente  
 questo, Ma ancora nel passato lungo assedio dell'armata Turческа dal principio nism' al fine  
 di quello tanto dentro quanto fuori di questa Citta, et fortezza di sua micbola senza  
 spargnar in modo alcuno sua persona et vita propria in tutti gli assalti continuamente  
 conl Crucifixo da una et l'arme da un'altra mano con franchezza d'animi, et Christianoche  
 istruttioni, et consigli animandi gli altri al medesimo ha contra Turchi molto animosamente  
 combattuto, et fatto tutti quel che ad' uno perfetto defensore de la fe Christiana debitanete  
 si conviene La onde noi mossi da tante sue buone operationi Auuemo voluto fargli sex  
 altra istantia benignamente le farti, accioche il tutto ad ogni un, sia in ogni luogo, et tempo  
 manifesto et chiaro In cuius rei 27 bulla nra magistralis in cara 27 Datum Melite 27  
 die Duodecima mensis January A. D. M. D. L. V. ad incarnatione

The Certificate issued by Grand Master J. de La Valette in praise of Fr. Robert of Eboli on the 12 January 1566. Royal Malta Library, Archives of the Knights of St. John 430 f. 271.

(By courtesy of the Librarian)

Archive at Floriana, Malta, were very useful. Other sources and studies consulted are indicated in the foot-notes.

Full information of Malta's History and of its Siege can best be obtained from the historians already mentioned. Sanminiatielli is good and readable but perhaps not very reliable and accurate. The Maltese historian Abela is an authority worthy of mention and the same may be said of Porter, Vertot, Prescott and Bradford.

This monograph is divided in two parts: in the first, I give an outline of Fr. Robert's life and in the second, his activities. I also want to make it clear that sometimes I have not been able to produce an exact statement, owing to the lack of important documents — there is nothing about him in the General Archives of the Capuchin Order at Rome, nor in that of the Capuchin Commissariate of Salerno. My conclusions, therefore, claim attention until other arguments prove the contrary. A consideration is duly given to the logical consequences of historical facts.

## I

It is not until the famous Great Siege of Malta of 1565 that we meet, for

the first time, the name of a certain member of the Capuchin Order. This Friar was Robert of Eboli, whose name is found in a few documents and registered in annals, records and descriptions of that very Siege.

Of his early life we can only form conjectures, for not even his birth-place seems to retain his memory or to possess even the date of his birth<sup>1</sup>. Only Malta can provide us with some information about him, yet no Maltese deemed it a duty to write down the details of Fr. Robert's family, childhood, studies and his first priestly activities. So, the picture of his life previous to his coming to Malta and after the Siege cannot boast of solid reliability.

There is however no doubt about his birth-place. It is a common use with the Capuchins to be called after the place which gives them birth<sup>2</sup>; consequently, that he comes from Eboli is quite obvious. Eboli or Evoli, an old Roman Municipium, some 60 kms. southeast of Naples was razed to the ground by Alaric in 410 A.D. In the Middle Ages it regained its splendour and glory under the domination of the Normans. In so far as the Capuchin Order is concerned, up to 1537 it was forming part of the Monastic Province of the Puglie<sup>3</sup>.

Mariano of Calitri places the date of his birth between the years 1510-1520, for the following reasons. The bravery and power of endurance shown by this gallant monk during the Siege of 1565, would be hard to find in an older man: at the same time his learning and the fame he possessed as an excellent preacher showed deep study in theology; therefore he could not have been younger than the last date allowed<sup>4</sup>. Apart from this mere hypothesis we cannot produce further evidence about his boyhood and first studies.

There are no records which give the exact date when Fr. Robert joined the Capuchin Order. Always on the supposition of the years given by Mariano of Calitri (1510-1520), he could have entered the Order from 1528-1535. It was in 1528 that the first Capuchins obtained the Papal confirmation of their new Institute<sup>5</sup>. It is important to point out, that the first house the Capuchins had in the Puglie was erected between 1530 and 1533 at Potenza<sup>6</sup>. There is therefore sufficient reason to believe that Robert became a Capuchin in 1530-35. Then, if he belonged to the monastic Province of the Puglie, his first year must have

1. MARIANO DA CALITRI, O.F.M. Cap., 13; *P. Roberto da Eboli e il Grande Assedio di Malta*, Salerno 1940; *Eroismo di un Frate Italiano nell'Assedio di Malta*, in "L'Italia Francescana" 9 (1939) 510ss.
2. In fact the *Ordinazioni dei Capitoli Generali dei Minori Cappuccini*, Milano 1929, Art. IV, Ord. 300, say that the Friars must not add to their names their family's surname; Cap. Gen. 27, 1613, Ann. Ord. V, 285, n. 45.; Cap. Gen. 28, 1618, V, 303, n. 15.; Mon. M'n. Gen., 14 July 1912, Ann. Ord. XXVIII, 238. To-day permission is granted to those who ask for it to add their surname.
3. MARIANO DA CALITRI, O.F.M. Cap., *I Frati Minori Cappuccini nella Lucania e nel Salernitano*, Salerno 1948, c. VII, 63-4.
4. IDEM, *P. Roberto da Eboli e il Grande Assedio di Malta — 1565*, 17.
5. BULLARIUM CAPUCCIORUM, I, 3.; MELCHIOR A POBLADURA, O.F.M.CAP., *Historia Generalis Ord. Frat. Min. Cap.*, Romae 1947, I, 28.; CUTHBERT OF BRIGHTON, O.F.M. CAP., *The Capuchins. A Contribution to the history of the Counter-Reformation*, London 1930, I, 50.
6. MARIANO da C., o.c., II, 23ss.

been passed at the convent of St. Anthony la Macchia in Potenza, where the Capuchins had their Novitiate<sup>7</sup>.

Historians could not mention Fr. Robert without underlining his sanctity and theological knowledge, in the way he acted while encouraging and helping Knights, soldiers and people of the besieged Island for three terrifying months<sup>8</sup>. The spirit which in the XIII century emanated from St. Francis of Assisi, seemed to be influencing Fr. Robert in his work for the salvation of souls. Francesco Cirni Corso, who a year later described the Siege, said: “. . . il Predicatore Cappuccino fece una predica nella chiesa conventuale dei Cavallieri, e quivi con parole di somma efficacia, esponendo quanto fosse la potenza dell'orazione, esortò tutti a doversi con quella principalmente armare per far resistenza a tanti nemici”<sup>9</sup>. The official historian of the Order, Giacomo Bosio, who had all documents at his disposal, admired the Capuchin and called him: “buono e devote Frate”<sup>10</sup>, who was ready for his final sacrifice in the struggle against the Turks. The Maltese chronographer Pelagius of Żebbuġ (1708-1781) wrote that Fr. Robert was a “pio e santo religioso”<sup>11</sup>.

Second to his sanctity, writers tell of his theological learning. The material we are making use of, however scanty it may be, does not hinder us from having an intimate view of Robert's scholarship. He appears as a good theologian and what is said of his sermons or comments on them, evidently point out that he had a profound knowledge of the Holy Bible. In his sermon delivered on Sunday, 20 May 1565, in the Conventual church of the Knights at the Bourg<sup>12</sup>, he emphasized the power of prayer quoting scriptural passages<sup>13</sup>: “. . . esortò tutti a doversi con quella [orazione] principalmente armare . . . perciocche con si santa armatura Giosue riportò tanta vittoria contro i Gabao-miti<sup>14</sup>; Mosè placò l'ira di Dio contro il popolo idolatra<sup>15</sup>; Heli ottenne la pioggia dal cielo in Galaad ove tre anni e sei mesi quei popoli senza erano vissuti<sup>16</sup>; e Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo nel Vangelo disse che quanto orando gli fosse domandato egli benignamente concederia”<sup>17</sup>.

Another sermon, to which reference is made by historians, was held a few days after the Siege was over, that is to say, between the 20th and the 22nd

7. *Ibid.*, o.c., XXIV, 334.; Mar'ano da C., o.c., *P. Roberto.*, 19.
8. A.F. CIRNI CORSO. *Commentarii d'Antonfrancesco Cirni Corso, nei quali si describe la guerra ultima di Francia, la celebratione del Coniglio Tridentino, e l'Historia dello assedio di Malta d'igentissimamente raccolta insieme con altre cose notabili*, Roma MDLXVII, V, 50r.
9. *Ibid.*, l.c.
10. G. BOSIO, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione et Illma Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano*, Roma 1598, 3, XXVII, 558 b.
11. CAPUCHIN PROVINCIAL ARCHIVE, Floriana, Malta, Ms. *Cronaca dei RR.PP. Minori Cappuccini di Malta*, by P. Pelagio da Zebbuġ, O.F.M. Cap., 2.
12. The reader may be interested to know that the Knights since their coming to Malta had their H.Q. and Conventual church — the Church of St. Laurence — at the Bourg, and they removed to the New City of Valletta in 1571. FERRES, A. *Descrizione storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866, 266.
13. CIRNI CORSO, o.c., V, 50 r.
14. *Jos.*, 9, 3-27.
15. *Exod.*, 32, 11-14.
16. *Kings*, IV, 17, 1.
17. *Matthew*, VII, 7-8.; *Luke*, XI, 9-10.

of September 1565<sup>18</sup>. On that occasion, the Capuchin Friar applied to the weak and emaciated survivors the words of the prophet Ezechiel: "Ossa arida audite verbum Domini<sup>19</sup>. It is a pity to say that none of his sermons has been preserved. But after all, there seems to be no room for doubt either in regard to his piety or to his erudition since Grand Master La Valette himself, in his appreciation writes: "... ha predicato qui in Malta . . . per tutto lo spatio della quadregesima . . . et molte volte si avanti come di poi di quella, con ogni sincerità, et mantenimento della fede catholica, con buona christiana, salutifera, canonica et ecclesiastica dottrina, e con ogni virtuoso esempio et morigerata vita . . . et christianesche instructioni et consigli . . ." <sup>20</sup>. This clear statement and Cirmi's also<sup>21</sup>, lead us to suppose that Fr. Robert preached in Malta even before the Turkish attack began.

Psychologically speaking Fr. Robert must have been a man of action, a man who knew what his vocation meant. No better proof can be produced in favour of this, than the words of the Grand Master: senza spargnar in modo alcuno sua persona et vita propria in tutti gli assalti continuamente, con crocifisso da una mano et l'arme da un'altra con franchezza d'animo ha contro i Turchi molto animosamente combattuto, et fatto tutto quello che ad uno perfetto difensore de la fe Christiana debitamente si conviene<sup>22</sup>.

No doubt, Malta was not the first place where Fr. Robert carried out his priestly activities. One must bear in mind that he lived at a time when Constantinople was the fear of all Europe; consequently, it is reasonably assumed that Fr. Robert had already dedicated himself to the service of the Church in the extermination of Mohammedanism<sup>23</sup>.

Very likely he was on such a duty when he was captured and carried to Tripoli. So far historians stated that Fr. Robert was captured by some unknown Turkish Corsairs somewhere along the Salernian coast between 1552 and 1558<sup>24</sup>, but Cirmi Corso in his Commentaries points out the exact place where the Capuchin Friar was captured and by whom: "Questo Padre, chiamato Fra Roberto da Evoli, era stato fatto schiavo da un corsaro nipote di Dragutte, che a Santo Vito nella costa di Trapani di Sicilia l'avea preso e condotto a Tripoli"<sup>25</sup>. In spite of our research we have not found the date of his capture. Yet, once informed that he was captured while at Santo Vito in Trapani, we had to part with the hypothesis that this took place on the coast of Salerno and Amalfi. So, we had to limit our study to the Sicilian shores. First, it should

18. BOSIO, *o.c.*, XXXII, 707 A.; CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, IX, 129 v.; ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI MILANO, Busta 26, fasc. 19, *Atti religiosi*, Alf. Ulloa.

19. *Ezechiel*, XXXVII, 4.

20. *Royal Malta Library*, ARCHIVES OF THE KNIGHTS, *Lb. Bull.*, 430, f. 271 v. We have published a Maltese translation of this letter in "*Lehen-is-Sewwa*", 5th September 1953.

21. CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, V, 51 r.

22. R.M.L., *Ibid.*

23. MELCHIOR, *o.c.*, 293; IMERIO DA CASTELLANZA, O.F.M.CAP. *Gli Angeli delle Armate* Bergamo 1937, 12-13; ROCCO DA CESINALE, O.F.M.CAP. *Storia delle Missioni dei Cappuccini*, I, Parigi 1867, 429-38.

24. MARIANO, *P. Roberto*, *o.c.*, 25ss.; IMERIO, *I Cappuccini a Lepanto*, in "*L'Italia Franc.*" 8 (1933) 71-2.

25. CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, l.c.

be emphasized that he was taken straight away to Tripoli: "preso e condotto a Tripoli"<sup>26</sup>, — no other places are mentioned — consequently this could not be effected before 1551, because only after that date, Tripoli was under the Turks. It fell to the Turks on the 16th August 1551, when the Governor Knight Vallies, gave up its defence<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, it may be affirmed that Robert did not fall into the hands of Dragutt's nephew before 1551. Such is the terminus "a quo", as a terminus "ad quem" we like to put 1553 for the following reason: after 1553 the Sicilian shores were purposely fortified against the Turks, making landing practically impossible. Owing to the many and awful raids by the Barbary Corsairs, the Viceroy of Sicily, Giovanni de Vega, ordered 37 new towers to be built at intervals along the coast. These look-outs had to give the alarm and the number of the approaching enemy vessels. This enterprise started in 1549 and reached completion some 4 years later, say by 1553<sup>28</sup>.

During those years the Ottoman navy under Dragutt and Bascia Rustan raided and despoiled Sicily more than twice. In Summer 1552, 115 Turkish sails were seen off Messina. On the 6th August of the following year, Dragutt himself was patrolling with a fleet of 28 galleys, and after sacking the cities of Licata and Agosta, took with him about 6,000 slaves. Then he turned for Sciacca, but as he thought it was well fortified abandoned the idea and occupied Pantalleria; there again more than 1,000 of its inhabitants became slaves of this Corsair<sup>29</sup>. Muratori accepts this event of 1553, but gives a slightly different and perhaps more detailed account of it, mentioning also Trapani and Sciacca as being unsuccessfully raided by Dragutt and his men<sup>30</sup>. The Corsair did not lose heart and his ships were seen again swarming around the Island in 1554 and 1555: on both occasions he had other places for his booty<sup>31</sup>. Finally, we cannot and we do not want to deny absolutely the possibility of other Turkish plunders on the Sicilian coastal cities and on Christian ships too<sup>32</sup>, but considering the present state of events, the capture of Fr. Robert in 1558 appears as the most probable.

If we assume that Fr. Robert was captured in 1553, we shall face less hindrances in reckoning the approximate period of his retention in slavery, giving due consideration to the date of his arrival in Malta. According to the manuscript of Father Giovanni Luigi of Floriana (Malta), Fr. Robert regained his freedom by the end of 1564<sup>33</sup>. La Valette's statement helps to confirm this. Issued on the 12th January 1566, it refers to Robert's preaching in Malta

26. *Ib id.*

27. BOSIO, *o.c.* XV, 314 A; L.A. MURATORI, *Annali d'Italia*, X, p. II, Roma MDCCCLIV, 109.

28. G. DI BLASI, *Storia del Regno di Sicilia*, 3, Palermo 1864, X, 46-7.

29. *Ibid.*, XI, 51.

30. MURATORI, *o.c.*, 125.

31. DI BLASI *l.c.*, G.R. CARUSO, *Storia della Sicilia*, 3, Palermo 1875, IX, 426-8.

32. MURATORI, *o.c.*, 195; CARUSO, *l.c.*

33. *Storia Delli RR. PP. Camuccini di Malta*, 9, in *Circolare emanata In occasione del Terzo Centenario dell'Introduzione dei Fratelli Minori Cappuccini nell'Isola di Malta*, Malta 1885, dal M.R.P. Alfonso M. da Valletta, O.F.M. Cap., 2ss. The Ms. was destroyed during a German air-raid on Malta on the 5th April 1942. We have micro-filmed the copy of the same Ms. kept at the Capuchin General Archives in Rome.

before the Lent of the preceding year. Cirni Corso holds the same opinion and says: “. . . con un vascello Maltese [Roberto] era capitato in quella Isola, ove dal Gran Maestro e da Monsignor il Vescovo per predicare la quadragesima passata era stato ritenuto”<sup>34</sup>. Bosio is not so clear, but generally agrees with the others that Fr. Robert was enjoying full liberty before the Siege, “. . . et uscito dalla schiavitù quivi [Malta] poco dianzi era giunto”<sup>35</sup>.

As a result of these claims, Fr. Robert must have remained under the slavery of his Turkish lord for a period of 10 or 11 years. A slave's life in a dungeon for such a long period is very undesirable; evidently Robert had to submit to it until a sufficient sum of money was raised for his redemption. He was ransomed through the generosity of his fellow christian slaves, then embarked on a Maltese ship and landed in Malta early in 1565<sup>36</sup>.

## II

Fr. Robert's role in Malta is linked with the Island's state on his arrival. Malta spent the spring of 1565 in preparation for the great attack. Back to October 6, 1564 the Turkish Emperor, Solyman II had sworn to get rid of the Knights of Malta, by capturing the Island, which he called “nido dei corsari”<sup>37</sup>. The Knights, who 42 years before, at the fall of Rhodes, through his clemency started off for Candia with full honours of war, had become again a menace to his Empire<sup>38</sup>. Now, not only did they give important help to the Christian Princes, but were in themselves a formidable and dreadful foe to every Turkish vessel<sup>39</sup>. It had become more than certain that the Turks would not have failed to assail the Maltese Islands. In fact they besieged Malta for nearly four months, i.e. from May 18th to September 7th, 1565.

Returning to Fr. Robert, we must recall that on his arrival in Malta, he was asked by the Grand Master and the Bishop to deliver some sermons especially the Lenten ones. Therefore his activities in Malta were inaugurated by preaching in the Conventual church of St. Laurence at the Bourg. Thus, since Fr. Robert preached before the Lent of 1565, “ha predicato . . . et molte volte si avanti come di poi di quella quaresima”<sup>40</sup>, that is before the first Sunday in Lent 11th March 1565, we may be sure that he landed in Malta in January or February 1565.

34. CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, V, 51r.

35. BOSIO, *o.c.*, XXV, 521 D.

36. This was not the first time that christian slaves stopped at Malta on their way back to Sicily after their ransom. For example, Mgr. Nicola Caracciolo, Bishop of Catania, and others were warmly welcomed by the Grand Master La Valette on the 12th Aug. 1561. — G. LONGO, *La Sicilia e Tripoli*, Catania 1912, VII, 49ss. Mgr. Caracciolo was soon ransomed but the poor Capuchin had to wait for a long time. Muratori says that two bishops were captured in 1561 on their way to the Council of Trent in the waters of Lipari. See note 32.

37. MURATORI, *o.c.*, X, 2, 214.

38. The Knights left Rhodes on the 1st January 1523. — E. SCHERMERHORN, *Malta of the Knights*, London 1929, 27.

39. C. SANMINIATELLI ZABARELLA, *L'Assedio di Malta*, Torino 1902, 117.

40. CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, V, 51 r. See photographic reproduction of La Valette's letter

His coming, at that time, was providential "Questo Venerabile Religioso... essendo stato schiavo in Tripoli di Barbaria, non senza speciale Divina provvidenza, liberato dalla potestà di quei barbari, ed avuto notizia dell'Assedio di Malta, si ha procurato l'imbarco adiritura per Malta, ove era giunto poco tempo avanti della venuta dei Turchi"<sup>41</sup>. Once in Malta he made it a point of encouraging its defenders, and preparing them for the great ordeal.

On May 18th 1565 a huge Turkish Armada of 193 ships, carrying in all 30,000 men, was sighted off the Island. The Maltese garrison was insignificant in comparison. The Grand Master Jean Parisot da la Valette (+1568), had at his disposal some 9,000 men-at-arms; of these 600 were Knights, the volunteers numbered about 1,000 and about 1,200 were hired troops. The Maltese Militia had the remainder together with 500 galley slaves<sup>42</sup>.

Two days later the Turkish hordes disembarked in Marsaxlokk harbour; so far they had no decisive plan of attack. When it became obvious that Malta was to be besieged, the Bishop Mgr. D. Gubelles and the Grand Master ordered a solemn procession. It was on that Sunday morning 20th May 1565, when Fr. Robert played a very important part deserving special mention. Fr. Robert knowing the need for prayer, and the comfort to be derived from it, took upon himself to introduce the 40 hours adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. This was the first occasion that this efficacious liturgical function was held in Malta and it was solely due to the pious monk Fr. Robert<sup>43</sup>.

He suggested this as an efficacious means to obtain victory, while he was urging the faithful to prayer, after the procession entered the church of St. Laurence<sup>44</sup>. The idea was gratefully accepted, and the Grand Master himself, the Bishop and the Prior Fra Antonio Crescino were the first to start this devotion: ". . . per lo spatio di una ora, et il predicatore fece loro un sermone esortandoli ad accomodare bene i loro conti con Dio e a non dubitar di qual si voglia pericolo e passata che fù l'ora vennero altri cavalieri e persone e s'andò seguitando"<sup>45</sup>. Meanwhile, Fr Robert animated every hour the fresh worshippers: "con diversi e divoti sermoni a ricorrere a Dio" and there he remained for the greater part of the day, tired and hardly sparing time to refresh himself<sup>46</sup>. Then, continues Cirmi Corso, he came out of the church with a companion, and, holding a Crucifix in the right hand and a sword in his left: "andava di continuo persuadendo i nostri, per amor del nostro Redentore a dover virilmente combattere"<sup>47</sup>.

41. CAP. PROV. ARCHIVE, Flor'ana, Malta. o.c. 4ss. R.M.L. Ms. 751, 240. Note, that Fr. Robert came to Malta on a Maltese ship and remained there on demand of the Grand Master and the B'shop.

42. SANMINIATELLI, o.c. 166. Historians differ slightly on the exact figures. For a more detailed account of the Siege see historians mentioned in the Introduction.

43. BOSIO, o.c., XXV, 521 D; CIRNI CORSO, o.c., V, 51r.; L. WADDING, O.F.M. Rec., *Annales Minorum* Ad Claras Aquas, 1933, XX, ad an. 1565, II.

44. BOSIO. *Ibid.*; CIRNI CORSO, *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.* Regarding the 40 hours adoration see LEXICON CAPUCCINUM, Romae 1951, col. 1431 and OSSERVATORE ROMANO, 5 giugno 1965.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*



So, caring little or nothing for the danger he acted both as spiritual leader, encouraging the defenders, and as a soldier fighting against the Turks.

Here we must say that before that day was over, the Turks had already occupied the village of St. John, to-day known by the people as Hal Ginwi<sup>48</sup>, and were preparing for further advance.

According to the proposal of Piali, the Turkish Grand Admiral, the first heavy attack was planned out against Fort St. Elmo, on Mount Sciberras<sup>49</sup>. Their guns opened fire on the Fort on the 24th May<sup>50</sup>. The defenders fought bravely, but when the walls of the fortress began to crumble under the continuous bombardment, they soon felt the position untenable without reinforcement. Hot arguments arose between the Grand Master and his Captains as to the possibilities of holding their position. Needless to say, reinforcements, material and moral were badly needed, owing to the fact that the besiegers were replaced often by fresh men, while the besieged were being reduced.

As the Grand Master was sparing no effort to hold the front<sup>51</sup>, a letter bearing the date of 8th June 1565 was sent to him by the defenders of St. Elmo. Therein they described the critical state and the resolution to withdraw or to sally out and die as Knights<sup>52</sup>. The Grand Master after advice from Knight Costantino Castriota, replied that the Fort was to held at all costs, for "il volerlo abbandonare si teneva per atto vile"; the defenders read these words and pledged themselves to the final sacrifice. Fr. Robert was charged to see to the money necessary to spend on them, and to hand it over to Castriota<sup>53</sup>. La Valette, wisely sent over fifteen Knights: "... per laudare l'ubbidienza e ringraziare la generosa risoluzione"<sup>54</sup>.

Now again the Capuchin Friar proved of great value to that little heroic band within the Fort. It is Bosio who relates that: "... col detto Montserrat andò il Frate Cappuccino, Fra Roberto da Eboli, il quale, per ergere, confermare a ricreare gli animi di tutti i Cavalieri con qualche consolazione spirituale fece un sì devoto, efficace ed accomodato sermone, dimostrando quanto vana, transitoria e piena di miserie sia questa vita umana . . . che, dopo essersi tutti devotamente confessati e comunicati, sembrava loro mille anni di venire alle armi con i nemici. Il detto Montserrat si commosse tanto al discorso del buon Cappuccino ed alla risoluzione di quei Cavalieri, che promise formalmente di voler far ogni sforzo affin di ottenere licenza di poter ritornar colà . . . e quello che è più notevole, due Ebrei, che il detto Cappuccino avea poco dianzi convertiti alla santa fede, vollero parimenti rimaner al Forte di Sant'Elmo a morire per la fede di Cristo"<sup>55</sup>. This event took place

48. F. BALBI DI CORREGGIO, *The Siege of Malta 1565*, Translated from Spanish by Major H.A. Balbi, Copenhagen 1961, 52.

49. On this Mount to-day there stands the Capital City of Malta, Valletta, whose foundation stone was laid by G.M. La Valette on the 28th March 1566.

50. COUSIN, R.J.D., *The Siege of St. Elmo*, Malta 1955, 48.

51. Fort St. Elmo, originally was a look-out built in 1488, and later in 1552 it was turned out into a fort. COUSIN, *o.c.*, 13 and 32.

52. COUSIN, *o.c.*, 91ss.

53. CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, V, 59 v.

54. BOSIO, *o.c.*, XXVI, 553 D. We have reproduced the text in modern Italian.

55. *Ibid.*, 553 E.

on the 9th June 1565, Vigil of Pentecost. The Arrival of Fr. Robert, consoled every Knight and soldier and he was happy and satisfied to learn that they all were ready to die heroically rather than submit to cowardice.

Instead of gathering them together — it was not possible to do so any longer, as they were under continuous assault, the pious and good Friar went round every single post: “con crocifisso in mano, che dava divotamente a baciare, tutti visitando e confortando nelle proprie poste”<sup>56</sup>. Twenty-five sentinels were killed on that single day, yet the resistance was so unequalled that Fr. Robert felt great surprise. The night between the 13th and 14th June, Fr. Robert with the Governor of the Fort, the Knight Luigi Broglia and many wounded returned to the Bourg, where he could not help praising the unflinching devotion of St. Elmo's heroes<sup>57</sup>.

There is no need to comment on the visit of Fr. Robert to St. Elmo; apart from the fact that he was risking his life and a chance to fall again in the hands of the Turks, his presence there effected great comfort and encouragement to its garrison. The reason why he left the Fort is yet unknown to us, most probably he was ordered to do so by Grand Master La Valette.

Mariano of Calitri<sup>58</sup>, besides erring in the date of Fr. Robert's return to the Bourg, affirms that this was due to the wound he had received there; three captured Turkish Standards are said to have been entrusted to him to carry to the Bourg and to hang in the church of St. Laurence. Mariano of Calitri cites Bosio for his first affirmation and Sanminiattelli for the second. As for the Standards, we do not know where Sanminiattelli gets the information, for he lacks references. As for the wound and the whole event both Cirni Corso and Bosio are silent. Most probably, he left because he had fulfilled the mission entrusted to him by the Grand Master; nor was it necessary to remain there as the Knights and the soldiers were not destitute of spiritual assistance. Cirni Corso says that two other priests (they belonged to the Order of St. John) were staying with them<sup>59</sup>. Heavy fighting continued until St. Elmo fell after a month of heroic defence on the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist, Patron of the Knights, on June 23rd, 1565.

Another important place where Fr. Robert carried on with his apostolic work was Fort St. Michael. Having defeated St. Elmo, the Turks now turned to St. Michael. Cirni Corso is very enthusiastic in recounting how the Capuchin preacher was incessantly helping the Bishop of Malta especially before the attack began. In spite of those wearisome days, they never failed to say their Mass, to hold processions and continuous prayers disposing the faithful to stand fast in their defence<sup>60</sup>.

The grand offensive, by sea and by land, was opened on the 15th July, on two new targets, namely Fort St. Michael and the Bourg. This battle was not less formidable than the former one at St. Elmo. At a critical instance the besieged were drastically set back when the invaders were able to find their

56. *Ibid.*, 558 B.

57. *Ibid.*, 558 C.

58. Mariano da C., *P. Roberto etc.*, o.c. 58.

59. CIRNI CORSO, o.c., V, 59v.

60. *Ibid.*, VI, 78r.

way into the fortress. It is impossible, according to Bosio, to describe the dreadful carnage<sup>61</sup>. In the midst of the fight there appeared Fr. Robert with a companion fighting as well against the Turks. Concerning this, the eyewitness Balbi de Correggio, writes that in the defence of St. Michael Fr. Robert was wounded, while he was leading them in driving back the enemy<sup>62</sup>. This time Fr. Robert was not spared, he fell injured and was taken to the infirmary. Attacks, however, went on from both sides, but Fr. Robert could not take active part any longer. Here we want to observe, that it seems difficult to admit what Bosio says of Fr. Robert: "Ferito e fiacco, che a mala pena reggevasi in piedi, non si poteva impedire ch'egli si trovasse a tutti gli assalti"<sup>63</sup>. The following denotes its improbability.

Early historians ascribe a heavenly vision to two persons, in similar ways but in different places. To solve this difficulty we must study each and every account. Our interrogatives are: Who was the real subject of the vision? and as corollary: Where did it take place and when?

Cirni Corso, Bosio, Ulloa and Sanminiatelli unanimously affirm that Fr. Robert was the subject of the vision. Cirni's words come here very timely: "Il predicador Cappuccino, che non era ancora sanato dalla sua percossa, non potendo per debolezza uscir fuori, si pose in oratione pregando Iddio per la liberatione di quell'Isola, e così gli parve che gli apparisce Nostro Signor con la Madonna, S. Giovanni Battista, S. Paolo e S. Francesco dicendogli; 'Sta di buon animo, che Malta non è per perdersi', il che dal Priore della Chiesa al Gran Maestro con molto piacere fu riferito"<sup>64</sup>.

But later historians such as Boverio, D'Arembergh and Wadding (continuation of his Annals) ascribe, substantially the same vision to another Capuchin, Ivo of Messina by name. Ivo, it is said, was praying in his room for the liberation of Malta, when St. Michael appeared to him (note that in Malta there was Fort St. Michael) and gave him, more or less, the same message<sup>65</sup>. Besides the message being substantially the same, there is a great analogy between the two visions: they are almost on exact parallels. There can be no doubt as to the similarity of the ideas they express. We find two similar subjects, i.e., two capuchins praying in their rooms and both for the

61. BOSIO, *o.c.*, XXIX, 606 E.

62. "Acabado el assalto, dimos infinitas gracias a nuestro señor Dios dela gracia que nos auia hecho, y a ello [Fort St. Michael] nos guiaua nuestro predicador fray Ruberto, el qual en todo el assalto yua por todas las postas con un crucifixo en la mano: y la espada en la otra: animadonos a bien morir, y pelear por la fede de Jesu Christo: y fue herido este dia su paternidad". — BALBI DA CORREGGIO, F., *La Verdadera Relacion de todo lo que el año de MDLXV ha succedido en la isla de Malta. Dirigida al Serenissimo Señor Don Juan de Austr'a su Señor*, Barcellona 1568, f. 73v.

63. BOSIO, *o.c.*

64. CIRNI CORSO, *o.c.*, VIII, 113 v.; ARCH. DI STATO DI MILANO, Alf. Ulloa Ms. see note 18. Bosio says that Fr. Robert went personally to inform the G.M. of the vision he had. See *o.c.*, XXVII, 677 E; SANMINIATELLI, *o.c.*, 551.

65. "Ivo aequo animo esto, Melita post aliquot obsidiones menses a barbarorum furore l'berabitur" BOVERIO, Z., O.F.M. CAP., *Annales Minorum Cappuccinorum*, I (1528-80), Lugduni MDCXXXII, 730 XXV-XXVI; C., D'AREMBERGH, O.F.M. CAP., *Flores Seraphici*, I, Milano 1648, 268; WADDING, *o.c.*, XX, 2.

same purpose, — the liberation of Malta. There may be another similarity in this, that to Ivo there appeared St. Michael and Robert had the vision while Fort St. Michael was under fire. Were there two visions? We do not think so, perhaps it was an easy duplication and the presumption stands in favour of Fr. Robert.

Just a chronological consideration on the historians and another one on Cirni's Introduction help us to come to a conclusion. First, all historians who ascribe the vision to Robert published their descriptions of the Siege, quite a long time before the others, who ascribe it to Fr. Ivo, had done so; none of the former writers had made the least mention of Fr. Ivo<sup>66</sup>. Therefore, how could it be explained? The duplication, probably, occurred in this way: as the first books reached their readers, the events of the Siege were spread abroad, not only in Sicily but all over Europe, whence the attribution of the vision to Ivo, who, according the Annals, had been praying for the liberation of Malta (who did not pray for Malta?). This is more comprehensible with regard to Messina, due to its frequent communications and relations with Malta during and after the Siege. Of consequence, no wonder if Boverio, D'Arembergh and the continuation of the Annals, who wrote later and depend on one another successively, ascribe the vision to Ivo. Boverio, the first one to write about Ivo, cites a Ms. from Messina, but as we have already seen, that was, most probably, a later attribution or addition to the many other visions he had already had. Moreover, Boverio himself neither was sure in dating the Siege of Malta nor had he read Cirni and Bosio<sup>67</sup>.

Secondly, Cirni Corso in his Introduction says that he had sought all information and remained more than a year in Malta and Messina gathering his material; before publishing it, he read it and reread it to those who were present at the event, correcting when necessary<sup>68</sup>. Then again, he was a cleric<sup>69</sup> and as such he would have been acquainted with many religious and ecclesiastics within his reach; hence, if it were Ivo who had the vision, quite some months before the Siege was over, why did it not reach Malta before Robert had had his vision? (it was not a question to remain private)<sup>70</sup>. Evidently, this did not occur, because it was rather after Cirni and the others had published their works, that Ivo happened to receive the vision. Nevertheless, we do not intend to diminish or degrade Ivo's holiness, nor to exclude another possible vision

66. First editions: CIRNI CORSO, o.c., in 1567; ULLOA ALF. Ms. in 1563; BOSIO, o.c., in 1594; SANMINIATELLI comes later, in 1902. The others are: BOVERIO, o.c., in 1632; D'AREMBERGH, o.c., in 1648 and WADDING, o.c., continuation from 1540 to 1622 were edited in 1740 and depend on Boverio and D'Arembergh in this regard.

67. BOVERIO, *l.c.* For the *Annales* of Boverio see CUTHBERT, o.c., II, 431ss.

68. CIRNI CORSO, o.c., Introduction "Io stetti circa un anno tra Malta e Messina, hora andando nell'uno ben conoscendo i siti e hora nell'altro luogo, Hebbi quasi tutte le relazioni, ordina i l'Historia, la lessi e rilessi a i capi . . . e più volte l'emendai . . . confrontando, il che è stato quello che principalmente mi ha aiutato ed assicurato".

69. COUSIN, o.c., 9.

70. "Post aliquot menses . . . liberabitur" BOVERIO, *Ibid.*

to him too, but we are inclined to ascribe it to Robert alone as the one endowed with all suitable circumstances.

There remains now to determine the place and give the date. Of all the historians who have Robert as the subject of the vision, only Sanminiatelli makes an exception<sup>71</sup>, describing the vision as taking place in the square of St. Lawrence at the Bourg while Robert was preaching to the soldiers. This assertion cannot be sustained considering the fact that the Capuchin was indoors<sup>72</sup> and still less admissible is Bosio, saying that Robert after he was wounded, took part in all the fights (see note 63). There can be no doubt that Fr. Robert had his vision in his room as the others affirm.

The date of Robert's vision must have been the 30th August 1565<sup>73</sup>, just eight days before the 'Gran Soccorso' led by Don Garcia de Toledo reached Malta, on the 7th September, Vigil of the Virgin's Nativity<sup>74</sup>. Hearing such tidings, the Grand Master, the Knights and all the Islanders greatly rejoiced because: ". . . a quel buon Padre davano credito grandissimo"<sup>75</sup>. At the arrival of this relief, the Turks hastily departed after having boasted that they could conquer Malta in ten days<sup>76</sup>.

The Siege being over, the Grand Master wanted to celebrate solemnly the Victory thanksgiving<sup>77</sup>. After a general procession along the street of the Bourg, Fr. Robert, who by this time had recovered, gave an eloquent and learned sermon<sup>78</sup>. He justly applied to his audience in the church of St. Laurence, the words of the prophet Ezechiel: "Ossa arida audite verbum Domini" (XXXVII 4). It must be said that the Maltese could not hide their sufferings, as Bosio puts it: "Figurando che gli assediati si fossero a termini tali . . . per ossa gia secche ed aride riputar si potevano"<sup>79</sup>, but happy and cheerful tears washed many a cheek as they chanted a very solemn "Te Deum"<sup>80</sup>.

Few months later, the Grand Master made it his duty to thank and acknowledge publicly Fr. Robert's valour and heroism. To this effect, he issued a proclamation bearing his Magisterial seal dated 12th January 1566. Its chief concern was to thank Fr. Robert and to manifest the stuff he was made of, his spirit and his merit.

This was the last news we could find concerning Fr. Robert; we do not know what happened to him after the Siege, where he went, where he died and where his remains are now lying. Had he left Malta before January 1566,

71. o.c., 551.

72. CIRNI CORSO, o.c., VIII, 113v.

73. *Ibid.*, but Bosio l.c. puts it on the 29th of the same.

74. *Ibid.*, XI, 118r.

75. BOSIO, o.c., XXXII, 677 E.

76. National Library, Paris, *Letter of La Valette to Caterina de' Medici*, Ms. N.A. 21, 601.

77. According to Bosio it was on the 16th Sept. 1565. See o.c., XXXIII, 707 E - 707 A. Cirni Corso puts it between the 20th and the 22nd of same. See o.c., IX, 129 v.

78. CIRNI CORSO, *Ibid.*

79. BOSIO, l.c.

80. BALBI, o.c., f. 74 r. "Retirados ya todo los Turcos hizo el Gran Maestro poner los vanderas ganadas en sant Lorencio, yglesia mayor con grande alegria: y se canto el Te Deum laudamus muy solemne . . . ."

it is believed that the Grand Master could have written his appreciation before that date.

So far we have traced the activities of Fr. Robert in the Island of Malta after his liberation from Tripoli. His zeal made him worthy of undying memory and of the highest praise. To sum up we must say, that his name has been linked with that of La Valette to the Siege of 1565 in the same manner as the Siege has been linked with Malta. And facts need no proof: his spirit lives today too wherever there is an ideal to serve, to fight for and in which to believe.

As the first known Capuchin to land in Malta<sup>81</sup>, he was highly esteemed, admired and followed by both Knights and Maltese<sup>82</sup>. In fact, one of the Knights who fought in Malta during the Siege, later left his Knighthood and joined the Capuchin Order as a brother, namely Bro. Thomas of Turin in the Province of St. Mary in Argis<sup>83</sup>. Two Maltese lads too, became Capuchins in Italy: namely, in the Province of Bologna, Fr. Salvatore Petit of the Bourg (1530-1622) and Fr. Raffaele Camilleri of Hal Tartani (1547-1622) in the Province of Naples<sup>84</sup>.

Both the Grand Master La Valette and the Bishop Mons. D. Cubelles and the Maltese population really liked to have amongst them forever the Capuchin Friars; but those were hard times and they were more occupied in building their new city and fortifying the bastions against further Turkish attack, than building a monastery for the Capuchins. However, the real reason for their delay in establishing a house in Malta seems to be the fact that it was not until 1574 that they were permitted to spread out of Italy<sup>85</sup>.

Unfortunately, the long desire of the Maltese could not be achieved until about twenty years later, that is, after the visit of Fr. Salvatore Petit to Malta<sup>86</sup>.

In the year 1582, the Magisterial chair of the Knights of Malta, was occupied by Grand Master Hugues Loubens de Verdalle (1582-1595) and it was the merit of this good prelate, as a sign of gratitude towards the Pope after receiving the Cardinal's Berretto, that the Capuchin Order was introduced in Malta. The first house was built outside the walls of Valletta in a place today

81. GIOVANNI LUIGI DA FLORIANA, in *Circolare*, o.c., 2.

82. CIRNI says that Fr. Robert had a companion but we know nothing about him.

83. BOVERIO, o.c., I, 777, XXXVIII, 1575.

84. ABELA, F., *Della descrizione di Malta*, Malta, 1647, IV, 4, 559. ABELA-CIANTAR, IV, 4, 115, 570; SALELLES, S., S.J., *De Materis Tribunalium S. Inquisitionis*, Roma 1651, Proleg. 13, 7, 64.

85. Brief of Gregory XIII, "*Ex nostri pastoralis officii*," of May 6, 1574 Bullarium O.F.M. CAP., I, 35; MELCHIOR, o.c., I, 81ss. CUTHBERT, o.c., I, 198ss.

86. CAP. PROV. ARCH., Floriana, Malta, Ms. *Apparato Cronologico* by P. Luigi Bartolo da Valletta, 46ss.; Ms. *Cronaca dei RR. P.P. Cappuccini di Malta* by P. Pelagio da Zebbug, 6 - 12, 20 - 23.

called Floriana, at the Grand' Master's expense between 1585-8. Therein still hangs Verdallé's portrait above this inscription:

Solum Umbram et Victum  
Capuccinorum Familiae  
Praebuit Hic Primus  
Anno Dni MDLXXXVIII

The foot-steps of Fr. Robert have ever since been followed by the Maltese Capuchins, who strove and are still striving to keep alive his historic figure in these Islands.