

# The Treasures at the NAG – the National Archives Gozo

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*“There is nothing that solidifies and strengthens a nation like reading the nation’s history, whether that history is recorded in books, or embodied in customs, institutions, and monuments”*

This dictum by the American writer Joseph Anderson (1836-1916) states one reason why every nation in the world should treasure its papers in archives. Archives designate the organised body of records produced or received by an entity in the transaction of its affairs and preserved by it. The entity in this case is the regional administration of Gozo. Hence the National Archives Gozo, as other institutions of similar nature, holds deposits of records of a public nature that are no longer in use for the purpose of administration.

## Foundation

The state of affairs in Gozo up to the 1980s vis-à-vis archives was catastrophic. When records of a public nature were no longer in use, they were put away in a basement and left to rot. It is known that in the late 1940s, a mass of hundreds of documents belonging to the *Universitas Gaudisii*, referred to further down, was handed over to the owner of a fireworks factory so that he could use the paper in the production of fireworks. These documents had been shifted from one place to another for close to four hundred years. They were last held in a cellar in a Government Department in the middle of Triq ir-Repubblika, Rabat, Gozo. During the festa season that summer, the history of Gozo literally went up in flames.

The initiative to put an end to this utter destruction of Gozo’s written heritage was taken by Anton Tabone, the first Minister for Gozo. Soon after the foundation of the Ministry for Gozo on 14 May 1987, he decided to set up an archive for Gozo. It was no small effort, as Malta still lacked a National Archives and a law governing public archives was still years away. The idea began to materialise when he roped in Joseph Bezzina, the undersigned, who had specialised in the science

of archivistics in London and in Rome, and shared with him his plan to set up an archive for Gozo.

The NAG – the National Archives (Gozo Section) – came into existence on 1 August 1989 inside a spacious hall annexed to the Public Library of Gozo in Triq Vajringa, Rabat. The premises had been built through the interest of Paul Cassar, Gozo Librarian, with the backing of Dr Daniel Micallef, Minister of Education, in 1986.

The NAG was officially inaugurated on Friday, 24 November 1989, by the Honorable Anton Tabone, Minister for Gozo, and by the Honorable Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, Minister of Education and Culture, a few weeks after the twenty-fifth anniversary of the independence of Malta and as part of the commemorative celebrations.

## The National Archives Act

On 23 January 1990, the Malta Parliament enacted ACT IV (1990) to regulate the National Archives, an act that contemplated more than one section of the National Archives (parag. 3). As a result, the NAG became officially the public record office for the documentation produced and received by past and present Government departments and establishments of the islands of Gozo and Comino.



The NAG shares premises with the Public Library, Gozo, in Triq Vajringa, Rabat.



The main hall of the National Archives Gozo.

Circular OPM/E/82/83 issued by the Staff Development Organisation of the Office of the Prime Minister (July 1991) under the sub-heading Gozo Records clearly laid down that: *Records originated by the Ministry for Gozo, Gozo sections of Government Departments, and by public bodies established for Gozo should be deposited at the Gozo Section of the National Archives which has been set up at the Gozo Public Library.*

The National Archives was put on a surer footing through ACT V (2005) The National Archives Act enacted by the Parliament of Malta on 10 May 2005. It laid out the constitution, the composition, and the functions of the National Archives establishing it as an entity or agency in its own right. It also made provisions for the appointment of a National Archivist and an Assistant National Archivist for Gozo together with other dispositions ancillary thereto.

The NAG is a sub-agency within this Government entity. As such, the National Archives, as the Agency, is the *regulator*; the Ministry of Gozo is the *administrator*.

## The Fonds

The NAG has twenty-six FONDS, that is, deposits from different entities. Each fond is divided into as many SECTIONS as is deemed necessary to reflect the various responsibilities or activities of the entity that created the fond. It is possible that a particular single office produced records related to various activities. In that case each activity

is considered a separate section and numbered accordingly to avoid the splitting of sections into sub-sections. Every single ITEM in each section is given a consecutive number.

The FONDS in the alphabetical order of the cataloguing code with the period covered are the following:

AG	• National Archives (Gozo Section)	1989+
CA	• Civil Abattoir	1891 – 1986
CC	• Civic Council	1959 – 1973
CG	• Curia Gubernatoriali (Courts of Law)	1609+
CI	• Charitable Institutions	1859 – 1947
CP	• Circulars and Posters	1814+
DF	• Documentaries and Films	1988+
GB	• Malta Government Savings Bank	1853 – 1978
GL	• Gurdan Lighthouse	1877 – 1981
HI	• Hospitals and other Institutions	1841+
IR	• Inland Revenue	1903+
LC	• Local Councils	1993+
MG	• Ministry for Gozo	1987+
MH	• Medical and Health Department	1875 – 1970
MP	• Monte di Pietà	1817 – 1979
PA	• Photographs. Albums	1945+
PD	• Police Departments	1889+
PM	• Plans and maps	1860+
PO	• Passport Office	1988+
PW	• Public Works	1840+
SG	• Secretariat to the Government	1803+
SN	• Street naming	1987+
SS	• State Schools	1845+
ST	• Statistics	1667+
UG	• Universitas Gaudisii	1560 – 1819
ZM	• Miscellanea	1575+

Records are catalogued in a four-level system – a system that most clearly reflects the workings of each entity. Level 1 is the depository (NAG); level 2, the fond (UG); level 3, the section (section 1 in this fond, being *Acta et Negotia*); and level 4, the single item (for example, volume 1).

## The Earliest Records

The oldest surviving records in Gozo belong to the Universitas Gaudisii, the medieval government of Gozo. The Universitas was probably founded in 1350, on the occasion of the incorporation of Malta and Gozo in the royal demanum by King Ludovico of Sicily. It is first referred to in a document of



An important document at the NAG: the history of Gozo (1745) by Frangisk Agius de Soldanis, the doyen of Gozo historians.

7 March 1373, concerning the approval of Perius de Trapano as notary public for Gozo. A second reference two weeks later, on 24 March, refers to a concession granted by King Ludovico to the Gozitans on 5 January 1351, when presumably the Universitas was already functioning.

The Universitas was broadly similar to many town councils throughout the Mediterranean regions of the Latin West. It was headed by a *capitaneus* or captain, assisted by four jurats or town-magistrates. The captain was officially known as *Capitano della Verga*, Captain of the Rod, as he carried a staff as a symbol of his office, authority, and dignity, but was referred to by locals as *Hakem*. He was appointed annually by the King. The town-magistrates, known locally as *gurati*, were also elected annually subject to royal approval. The Universitas had the right to choose other officials to help it in the fulfillment of its duties.

The *Universitas Gaudisii* was autonomous from that of Malta. By the first quarter of the fifteenth century, it even had its own consul in Palermo so that its capitula or petitions could be presented to the King without intermediations.

It dealt with numerous items of local business. Its multiform activities during its first one hundred and fifty years are known from foreign sources, for no records prior to the middle of the sixteenth century survive in Gozo. It is believed that the oldest records perished in 1551, when the island was ransacked by the Turks. Then the whole population was taken into slavery and official records were presumably stolen or burnt.

The earliest records after the 1551 holocaust dates from 1560 and they are preserved in the most important section of the Universitas: the registers of acts and transactions. The variety of documents in this section is beyond description. One may interest himself in the list of Government officials, many of Sicilian origin, that were administering the island during the years of re-population, or the costs related to the horse and donkey races organized for the feast of Santa Marija. The Bandi or legal notices issued from time to time furnish a good idea of the problems that the officials met in the running of the island: problems as far apart as the cleansing of public areas in the Citadel and the regulations to be followed by the padroni of the boats licensed to run the passenger service and to convey goods between Malta and Gozo. Price-lists of all commodities especially foodstuffs were issued regularly after 20 November 1565 and it is quite absorbing to study how the officials went out of their way to keep rising prices in check.

The short French rule in Gozo (June-October 1798) is also reflected in this fond with several documents dated in the Republican calendar. When, in 1800, Gozo with Malta passed under British rule, the role of the Universitas was severely curtailed and, eventually, it was declared dissolved as from 1 January 1819.

### A Treasury of Gozo History

With the British reforms introduced in 1819, the management of Gozo public affairs passed into the hands of a civil official known since then by



The title-page of a copy of the report of the Apostolic Visit carried out by Pietro Dusina in Gozo in 1575.

a variety of names: from the Chief Civil Officer, to Lieutenant Governor, to Commissioner, to Secretary, to Minister. The related fond at the NAG compliments that of the Universitas.

In 1960, the administration of Gozo was partly taken over by the Gozo Civic Council. The proceedings of the Council together with its account books, cash books and other miscellaneous registers can be consulted in another fond at the NAG.

The Archives has fonds from many other public entities. The *Curia Gubernatoriali Insulae Gausos*, the Governor's Court of Gozo, is the most voluminous at the NAG, with thousands of registers that are a rich source for the social history of Gozo. There was a civil and a criminal court together with a court of appeal. Its functions were increased in 1803 and in 1840.

The fond of Saint John the Baptist Hospital, Gozo's general hospital, and other health institutions such as the village Government clinics is basic for a

study of health care and the incidence of disease in Gozo. The daily Occurrence registers from the local Police Stations are a diary of the day-to-day affairs in Gozo many of which are recorded nowhere else.

The house plans presented by persons who wanted to built or carry out adjustments in their houses are preserved in the Medical and Health Department fond. They are still of great benefit to their descendants who want to enlarge or adjust the old premises.

The photographs fond conserves thousands of pictures related to Gozo. These include some two thousand photographs of Gozo past that the NAG acquired by purchase or by donation. The general public can go through the albums and also acquire these photos.

Other interesting fonds are those of the Works Department, with a good number of plans; the Ġurdan Lighthouse fond that has a record of the weather in Gozo from 1877 onwards; and fonds from other minor, but not less important, entities.

All these fonds at the National Archives are at the disposal of the general public to pore through and to study. They are certainly a significant component of the national heritage of the Maltese archipelago.



A group from Metz, France, at the NAG.

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