

The *Mahr*s of Gozo Before 1530

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Introduction

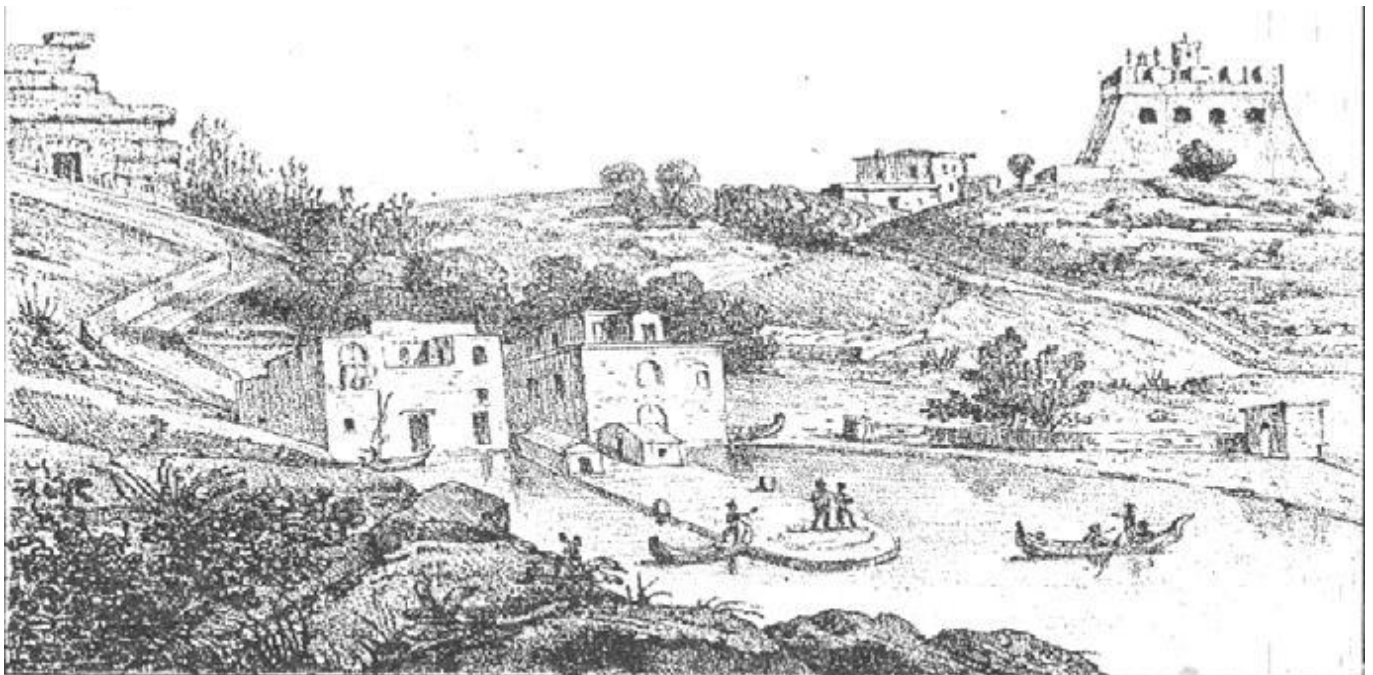
It appears that, in the Middle Ages, the defence of Gozo, like that of Malta, hinged on two important elements: (i) an early-warning system of coastal watch-out posts to give sufficient advance warning for the population to get inside the walls of the acropolis and (ii) a last-ditch defence of the main fortification that was the *Castrum* or *Castello* in the middle of the island, at whose feet nestled its Rabat, or suburb, comprising the entire population of Gozo.

Warning System of Coastal Watch-out Posts

It must be said that part of the early-warning network included also close collaboration between the two islands that helped each other in passing information on the presence of the enemy in these waters. Thus, it transpires from documents of the 1490s [DSMH II/4: 313, 437], that the Mdina bonfire-alarm, ignited on top of the *Torre Mastra* at the entrance to the city and for which the Jewish community was responsible, was not only

intended to relay information to Malta's coastal guards and villages, but was also intended to alert Gozo, probably via Mellieħa. We also have copies of letters sent between the officials of Gozo and those of Malta concerning attacks by the enemy on Maltese shipping [DSMH III/1: 126 (28.x.1526)], as well as details of expenses incurred in sending couriers between the two islands when there were sightings of enemy activity around Comino and Mellieħa [Mandati M36: 634 (1529); 710 (1530); M1: 116 (1520)].

The need to keep a constant guard on the coastline of the kingdom is first heard of in 1375 when King Frederick IV appointed Philippus de Marino to the post of organizing the coastal and city watch [DSMH II/1:150]. Admittedly this was in connexion with Malta but there is ample evidence that Gozo too had its own system. The general loss of pre-1551 sources for Gozo has, in fact, deprived us of precisely one all-important document that must have existed: Gozo's Militia List and Roster, analogous to the Maltese lists which are extant from 1417 [Wettinger 1969 and *idem* 1979].



Lith. par Brocens

Vue prise à l'isle de Gozo

Peinture par Cl. de Marini

Early 1820's view of Torri Garzes from Mgarr Harbour.



The Comino Tower (Photo courtesy of <http://www.flickr.com>, Feb. 2012)

What evidence do we have, then, for Gozo's militia? A document from the Palermo Chancery of 25 October 1399 [DSMH II/1:281] blames the negligence in Malta and Gozo of keeping a tight coastal watch for the great damage suffered in these islands from Moorish incursions; as a consequence, the King took this responsibility away from individuals who had, hitherto, held the office and placed it squarely in the hands of the jurats of the respective *Universitates*. Again, a document of 2 October 1400 [DSMH II/2:2] shows how the Notary Bernardus de Theophilo began to be employed to help the Gozitan jurats every evening to draw up the list of names for the Gozitan coastal watch.¹ In 1402 *algozirius* Johannes de Sancta Columba was given the captaincy of both Malta and Gozo for five years with all rights on the islands' watch [DSMH II/2: 14-15].² In 1407 the Gozitans were exempted from all excise dues on the exportation of their mules to Sicily in exchange for horses needed for the defence of the island [DSMH II/2: 102]; Captain of Gozo, Peri di Ari, is known to have kept these horses in 1410 [DSMH II/2: 144]. In that year Queen Bianca warned the *vicesecretus* for Gozo that certain men who were bound to keep horses

for the defence of the island were being neglectful of their duty and enjoined him that he should be making an example of them: *ki vi dijati fari mustra di loru et rividiri si stannu apruntu di cavalli et di armi*; these should have all their subsidies stopped and the same given to more deserving and willing persons [DSMH II/3: 143]. Among these defaulters, Queen Bianca was referring to, there may have been the Catalan Guillelmus Cabanes who was living in Gozo and who, two years earlier, had been given six *uncie* annually to keep a horse for the island's defence [DSMH II/2: 117].

As for Malta, horses in Gozo played a vital roll in the smooth running of the coastal watch or *mahrās*, as it was known. Those who could more afford it, especially the fief-holders, were bound to keep horses for use in the defence of the island. The fief holders had it stipulated in their contract how to fulfil this military obligation in direct relation to the land they were given. Thus, for Gozo, Henricus de Osa was given the land called *Ta' San Kożma* in 1368 with the obligation of providing a soldier for each twenty *uncie* of produce from the land. Salvus Cadumi of

¹ The corresponding office in Malta was given, after the Monroy affair, to Franciscus de Allegritto in 1428 [DSMH II/3: 243, 376] and continued to be held by his descendants well into the XVIth century [DSMH II/4: 209].

² The Captains are known to have held these rights also in 1413-1416 [DSMH II/3: Docs. 151, 208, 215, 224].



Xlendi Tower. (Photo courtesy of <http://dinlarthelwa.org>)

Gozo was given the land called *Il-Qanfud ta' San Marċjan* for providing an *equus armatus*, a heavily armed horseman, for each twenty *uncie* of produce in 1398. Periconus de Bernardo of Gozo was given the *Tal-Majmuna* estate in the *Ranġisija* district of Gozo under the same conditions in the same year. And, in the following year, Antonius de la Barba was similarly given *Ta' Hamitu*. This was not any different from Malta where horses are also known to have been used by the *rividituri*, or overseer, for coordinating neighbouring watch-posts.

A tantalizing incident related to the watch, in which Gozo's *dolce vita* surfaces, is revealing [DSMH II/4: 91]: On 1 April 1488 Joannes Fsadni accused Antonius Platamone and accomplices that, by night, and while Fsadni was away on coastal watch duty, Platamone had entered his residence where his daughter Angela was in the company of a nun called Ylagia who was chaperoning the girl. Angela's relatives caught Platamone *in flagrante delictu* raping the girl etc.

The Maltese militia roster [Wettinger 1979] clearly locates the various look-out posts mainly along the northern coast of the island and, as we have shown elsewhere, these were consolidated during the time of the Knights, at times with the erection of coastal watch-towers. For lack of direct evidence for Gozo one can infer from the Maltese situation that the medieval posts were included in the string of posts known from the Knights' period. Abela [1645, 121-2], in whose day there were already in existence *Torre Garzes* and *Torre della Punta di Marsalforno*, both of which would have been key positions, lists besides *Wardija ta' Ras it-Tafal*, *Wardija ta' Ġebel Bin Giorgi* (later *ta' San Ġorġ*), *Wardija ta' Mwieġel il-Baħar*, and *Wardija ta' Rdum Ferdien*; *Wardija* being the local form of *Guardia*. Not mentioned by

Abela but appearing in earlier notarial documents is *Il-Wardija ta' Handaq ir-Rummien*. Other place-names with clear Arabic connotations of look-out are *Nadur* and *Qal[gh]a*, above *Hondoq*, which, together with *Nadur il-Kelb*, must have been look-out positions from very early times.

Defence of the *Castello*

The defence responsibilities of the Gozitans, like their Maltese counterparts, included also contributing certain unpaid days of work for the repair of the main fortifications of the island – the *Castello*. Like the Maltese, the Gozitans did not take lightly to this added burden of having to spend nights on the coast and days of unpaid work on the walls of the *castrum*. This *angara* or corvée work was viewed as a relic of the days of serfdom and was greatly resented by all. The *Capitula* presented to the Viceroy by the Gozitan jurat Cola de Algaria on 5 November 1443 [Giambruno/Genuardi 1918, Doc. IV, n. 5] make much of the Gozitans' burdens – *li dicti poviri angariati ali guardii di la terra et a la maramma dili mura et multi altri angarii in serviciu dila regia magestati*, echoing the Maltese protest *di liberari li popoli dila dicta terra dila angaria dili marammi quanto ancora dila angara dila guardia chamata lo maharas* [NLM Lib. MS. 670, f. 42v (1531)].

If most of this was, more or less known, we now have important additional information which comes in the form of a set of *Capitula* for Gozo, dated 16 January 1516, hitherto ignored, unearthed from the Palermo Chancery records. In these *capitula*, one complaint of the Gozitan *Universitas'* ambassador, Cola Calabachi, was that Gozitans craftily managed to slip out of their onus to do guard duty by going to extremes in order to get themselves elected to one of the municipal posts – jurats, judges, *acatapani*, notaries – for at least one year in order to be exempted from this duty for that year, which was the standard practice. Once they benefitted from that privilege, they then abusively extended the exemption thereafter. This, of course, in the long run created a great dearth of guards to choose from. Needless to say, the Viceroy acceded to Calabachi's request to stop this malpractice. In the process of presenting his case Calabachi, in the *Vth capitulum*, gives important details of how the Gozitan watch operated. He gratuitously informs us that:

- *ali mura*, that is, on the walls of the *Castello*, 21 guards and twelve *suprastanti* were required, whereas

- 39 guards were needed every night on the coastal watches together with four *rivedituri* on mules.

On the assumption that in Gozo, as in Malta, three men were posted to each coastal watch, one can deduce that there were no less than thirteen watch-posts, six more than the seven *Wardija* posts noted by Abela. These figures can be fruitfully compared with Malta's militia roster [Wettinger 1979]: The 21 guards *ali mura* on Gozo compare with the 30 at Mdina *ali mura*, – this makes sense as the perimeter of the *Castello* was roughly two-thirds that of Mdina – whereas the twelve *suprastanti* of Gozo are roughly a half of Mdina's *ala plaza* contingent – 25 on each day between Monday and Friday, and 26 on Saturdays and Sundays. Furthermore, the three

guards per watch-post on the coast, being the same as for Malta, together with four *rivedituri*, would give the total of 76 men per day, or 532 different able-bodied men doing night-watch on Gozo. To obtain an estimate of the total population for Gozo we need to compare these figures with those for Malta. The Maltese militia roster of 1417 gives 910 men, compared to the 1667 of the militia list of 1419-20, yields a Maltese population of some 8,000, using a multiplier of five. The 532 on Gozo's militia roster would then yield an estimate of 975 for a hypothetical Gozitan militia list, which, in turn, yields c. 4,875 for the total population. This figure compares very favourably with the round figure of 5,000 estimate mentioned by the Order's commissioners of 1524 (Boisgelin, 1804: ii, 17).

The Night Watch							
	# coastal posts	# men per night	<i>rivedituri</i>	<i>ali mura</i>	<i>ala plaza suprastanti</i>	total per night	grand total
Malta 1417	24	72	11	30	25	138	910
Gozo 1516	13	39	4	21	12	76	532

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