

SIMON MERECIECA

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH ON GRAND MASTER JEAN DE VALETTE'S PROGENY

The Reconstruction of Maltese Families

Dr. Giovanni Bonello's two recent articles published in the *Sunday Times* on May 2014, reopened a can of worms regarding the existence of any offspring fathered by Grand Master Jean de Valette. Dr. Bonello provided historical evidence that this Grand Master of the Order of Malta had at least two children. The first child was Barthélemy, whose birth was legitimized by the King of France.¹ The second was a girl, by the name of Isabelle who, unlike her brother, did not need any form of legitimization. Her social rehabilitation came through marriage, which was celebrated in Birgu on 15th January 1567. The Marriage Act specifies that Stefano Bonaecurso, Fiorentino married Isabella Busavia whose father was Cola. Now, Dr. Bonello assures us, that Isabella's father was not Cola but de Valette, while the Florentine nobleman's correct surname was Buonaccorsi.² Unfortunately Isabella's marriage ended in tragedy. Stefano Buonaccorsi murdered her in what appears to have been a crime of passion less than a year after marrying her.³

Dr Bonello's work gave me the opportunity to return to an original contribution of mine, published in the daily edition of the *Times of Malta* back in 1998, wherein I referred to an archival discovery in the Baptism Acts of Birgu. In this Register. I had found recorded the birth of Matteo in 1563, described as the son of Gio Batta who, in turn, was the son of Grand Master Jean de Valette.⁴

This discovery is part of a vaster on-going process of reconstruction of past Maltese families that was initiated in collaboration between the Department of History at the University of Malta and the Centre Roland Mousner at the University of Paris, Paris IV – Sorbonne. The idea originated in 1994 when the then Rector of the University of Malta, Fr. Peter Serracino Inglott, together with the Professor of History, Victor Mallia Milanese, for the first time, deliberated the reconstruction of the Maltese population onto a computer database. The first parishes chosen for reconstruction were two of

¹ Giovanni Bonello, *The Love Children of Grand Master Jean de Valette*, The Sunday Times, May 26, 2013, pp. 48-49.

² Giovanni Bonello, *The Love Children of Jean de Valette (Part 2) Murder of Grand Master de Valette's Love-daughter, Isabelle Bounaccorsi*, The Sunday Times, June, 2, 2013, pp 48-49.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ariadne Massa, "16th Century Birth Certificate Linked to La Vallette, Claimed to Record the Birth of Grand Master's Grandson", *The Times*, Tuesday, January 27, 1998, p. 6.

the harbour areas; Senglea and Bormla. The help offered by the then curator of the Cathedral Museum, Dun Gwann Azzopardi, was indispensable and helped expand this project to the families of Rabat, Bir Miftuh, Qormi and Birgu. It was while painstakingly reconstructing the population of Birgu that the name of de Valette's grandson cropped up for the first time.

The work of reconstruction involves identifying each and every individual who lived in a specific geographical area together with all his or her kinship. Whenever possible, the exact place of birth and residence is also established. The field of research has been extended further to reconstruct the entire population of Malta in the sixteenth century. In fact, besides Birgu, the work has now expanded to Zebbug and Gozo. These two localities have now been reconstructed. The study is now focusing on the population of Zurrieq. Thanks to this very laborious process, each and every individual, who was born in Malta, is put within a historical context by having his or her family traced, starting with the date of birth, marriage and death correctly established.

It was never the intention to highlight particular findings of this research. Nor was it my intention to go public on certain 'discoveries' concerning the private life of individuals. However, in the study of historical demography, some discoveries are bound to be of some consequence for they represent more than a mere social discovery. Indeed, they do arouse a degree of interest and polemics.

Thanks to Dr Bonello's research, the private lives of some Knights of Malta are now under the spotlight. Their achievements and human weaknesses remain a source of curiosity. In the case of the Grand Master's grandson, it was only thanks to the personal interest shown, by journalist Ariadne Massa, back in 1998, and to the many night faxes that circulated at University on the accidental discovery that Grand Master de Valette's had a son, which ended up becoming a news item in a local paper. Otherwise, the story would have remained buried like that of most other children who were born out of wedlock, and whose individual stories are of no particular interest to the general public. Their names are just a number amidst hundreds of thousands of other individuals on this database relating to Malta's past population.

The Literary Tradition of de Valette's offspring

As Dr. Bonello has pointed out tales of illegitimacy give rise to sensationalism particularly in the case of the Order due to the fact that the Knights Hospitallers were bound by a vow of chastity. This vow was taken together with those of obedience and poverty. In reality, such vows were taken by all

members of religious orders (and still are) as part of their mission statement. However, it was only during the eighteenth century that, any breach of the vow of chastity by a Knight of Malta, began to be seriously challenged by public opinion after coming under strong criticism in literary works of the Age of Enlightenment. Voltaire referred to the Hospitallers' sexual licentiousness in his novel 'Candide'. Unlike what one might think today, licentious behaviour was far more tolerated in the sixteenth century than in later periods.⁵ The reason why the Knights were put under scrutiny was because they were also a religious order; therefore, their sexual licentiousness was considered morally a more serious infringement than when committed by laity or secular clergy alike. The Knights of Malta reacted by slowly distancing themselves from the religious milieu while taking on a more mundane and secular image.

Yet, the story of de Valette's licentious behaviour was recounted in literary circles. The most famous reference is to be found in Frederick Schiller's unfinished play on the Great Siege of Malta entitled *Die Malteser*, which deals with Grand Master de Valette's love affairs and offspring. It is important to remember that Schiller was a trained historian and professor of history.⁶ His original plan was to write about the most important world sieges. Malta's Great Siege was to be one of them. However, Schiller abandoned the project and turned to writing literary works. He decided to write a play about the Great Siege. In this play, Schiller attributes to the Grand Master the existence of an illegitimate son, who meets a hero's end by dying in combat in the desperate defence of Fort Saint Angelo. According to Albert Friggieri, the main source for *Die Malteser* was Abbe' de Vertot's account of the history of the Knights.⁷ Friggieri notes that "in his personal copy of Vertot's book, Schiller had marked the section in which La Valette's reaction to the news of the death of his nephew and the latter's friend (Polastron) is reported".⁸

The publication of the eyewitness account of the Siege of Malta by Francesco Balbi da Correggio gives credence to Schiller's work and perhaps explains the origins of this story. Balbi published his account of the Great Siege in Spain, in 1567. A second revised and extended edition was published in 1568.⁹ In his eye-witness account, Balbi refers to the death in combat of Henri and

⁵ Daniela Lombardi, *Storia del Matrimonio. Dal Medioevo a oggi*, Mulino, 2008; Giovanni Romeo, *Amori proibiti, I concubini tra Chiesa e inquisizione*, Laterza, 2008; Roberto Bizzocchi, *Cicisbei. Morale private e identità nazionale in Italia*, Laterza, 2008.

⁶ Toni Cortis ed., *The Maltese Cross, Background to an Opera on the Mystery of Schiller's Die Malteser*, Malta University Publishers, University of Malta, 1995.

⁷ Albert Friggieri, 'Schiller's Die Malteser', *The Maltese Cross, Background to an Opera on the mystery of Schiller's Die Malteser*, ed. Toni Cortis, Malta University Publishers, University of Malta, 1995, p. 89.

⁸ Ibid, p. 91.

⁹ In 1961, Henry A. Balbi, who claims to have been a distant descendent of Francesco, published a literal translation of this account in English.

Giovanni Parisot de la Valette. Whitworth Porter claimed a kinship between Giovanni Parisot de la Valette and the Grand Master.¹⁰ Others speculated that he was not simply a nephew but his illegitimate son. But the controversy stopped there. Schiller's notes for this play continued to be read in terms of a literary work and his unfinished work was never considered a historical canon. Dr. Bonello has proven that Schiller's writing had historical foundations and that de Valette's contemporaries were in the know. In reality these were anecdotes very much in the public domain with which many could easily identify.

The issue of de Valette's offspring resurfaces, in the nineteenth century, in a publication in France. It is a novel on the private life of a particular knight, the famous Romegas, who had strong aspirations of becoming Grand Master. The novel provoked a strong reaction from the French aristocracy at the time and the bourgeois milieu of Charles X and Louis Philippe were not amused with such a novel. The restoration of the Ancien Regime in Europe after 1814 brought public morality into political equation once again. Discussing illicit sexual matters began to be frowned upon, and would reach an apex in England during the Victorian Age.

The author of this novel, M. De La Madeleine is a female writer. She was the Countess de la Fayette and wrote other literary works including *La Princesse de Cleves* and *Justicier du Roi*. She claimed that her novel was based on true documentation to be found in a private collection. The work revolves round the deeds of the Hospitaller Knights prior and during the Great Siege. The romantic love affairs of important knights, such as Romegas, were overtly described. He had a lover, in the person of the Spanish courtesan, Maria. Nor was Grand Master de Valette spared. His love affairs were covertly narrated. However, De Valette is given a more valiant profile but the author alludes to the fact that the Grand Master had a mistress. On the eve of the Great Siege, the Grand Master was on a hunting-expedition in Buschetto Gardens: *'Jean de La Valette, convia galamment sa jeune hôtesse à venir prendre part aux plaisirs d'une chasse au faucon. Elle accepta, empressée, et sautant sur le joli palefroi qui lui avait été destiné, elle donna elle-même le signal du départ.....'*¹¹

The truth behind this narrative is not the scope of this paper. What is of interest is the reaction that the author received from certain quarters of society. However, the success of the book would make La Madeleine

¹⁰ Whitworth Porter, *The Knights of Malta of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem*, Vol. II, Spottiswoode and Co, London, 1858. pp.137-138.

¹¹ M. De La Madeleine, *Grande-Prieure de Malta, 1565*, 2nd Edition, Paris, Ambroise Dupont, Ade Vivierre No. 7, Paris, 1835, pp.144-5.

republish her novel in Paris, in 1835, and dedicate it to her female readers. Dr. Bonello's recent discoveries are proving La Madeleine correct. Whether La Madeline was referring to the same documents discovered by Dr. Bonello in France, or she had other sources remains a subject for further historical research.

Illegitimate Children in Birgu

The works of Schiller and La Madeliene were not far from the sixteenth century reality that existed in Malta under the Knights. Pre-siege Birgu society was a mixture of different ethnic groups; Greeks, French, Italians, Spanish, Russians, Ragusans and Muslims who mixed with the local community. The physical space of the medieval town of Birgu extended to areas, which now form part of Bormla and its community was spread over a territory, which comprises today's area of Birgu, Bormla and Senglea. This area constituted the only true urban environment on the Island. The arrival of the Hospitallers had changed life in Birgu. The number of elite city dwellers suddenly increased. Foreign doctors and other professionals found shelter behind the fortified city and its suburbs. The life cycle of marriages, births and death increased. The elite were directly involved either by being parents and baptising their children or they were invited to act as godparents. In this cosmopolitan atmosphere, the Hospitallers did not have a problem to attribute the existence of an illegitimate child and have their parenthood "legitimised" through baptism by acting as godparents. This also holds water in case of baptisms featuring children borne to single mothers. In those days, the local parish priest had no difficulty in attributing a father to babies born out of wedlock, in particular if he was a member of the elite.

What we call illegitimacy provoked a lesser scandal than infertility. A woman's accomplishment was measured by how fertile she was to the extent that a widow, in her twenties with children, had a better probability of re-marrying than a maiden in that same age group.¹² The same can be said for men. Celibates, including priests, had no difficulty in baptising their infants born to their unmarried servants or girlfriends: the town of Birgu was no exception. It confirmed the rule.

There is a similar situation in the New Testament. The most important thing for St. Elisabeth was to have a child, so that no one could accuse her that "Elisabeth was barren".¹³ In the sixteenth century, the purpose of the Baptism

¹² Simon Mercieca, *Community Life in the Central Mediterranean, A Socio-Demographic Study of the Maltese Harbour Towns in Early Modern Times Bormla: 1587 – 1815*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Paris IV – Sorbonne, 2002.

¹³ Luke, 1, 7.

Acts was to record baptisms with no need to explain any social standing of the parents. Such need would arise only in the following centuries when the legitimate status of the infant began to be clearly pronounced.

Then, the high number of single mothers mentioned in the Baptism Acts of Birgu makes it a misnomer to define them all as prostitutes. Between 1555 and 1655, there were more than 394 illegitimate births.¹⁴ In some cases, the name of the same mother recurs more than once, which makes it highly probable, that the same mother was having more than one baby out of wedlock. For this reason, even the past label of courtesan needs a qualification. The presence of courtesans roaming the streets of Birgu attracted the attention of the traveller Nicolas de Nicolay, whom he described with the greatest ease.¹⁵ Yet, rather than being defined as women of loose morals, who were ready to offer their bodies to anyone who came along, most of these individuals had a stable relationship, either with a knight or an important corsair. The famous Spanish corsair, Alonso de Contreras, was one who frequented courtesans in Malta. At the same time, he had a stable relationship with a particular one who lived at the Parish of Porto Salvo in Malta¹⁶ and expected total fidelity from his wench, even if, they were not married.¹⁷ This should be more equated to a sort of consort or partner rather than with the concept of a prostitute.

Even if the Baptism Acts fail to spell this out, some of these babies were born out of an illegitimate relationship with a knight. The Hospitaller Antonio Bosio is a case in point.¹⁸ He became world famous for the discovering catacombs in Rome. He was an illegitimate son of a Knight of Malta and a Birgu woman.¹⁹ The parish priest of Birgu, Matteo Fava, had no problem to acknowledge the existence of illicit affairs of the Knights²⁰ or of endorsing their paternity. Fra Filippo d'Amico had no difficulty in publicly acknowledging that Geronimo, born in 1563, was his son.²¹ Dr. Bonello's findings fall within this paradigm.

¹⁴ Vanessa Borg, *Birgu: A Demographic Overview 1558-1658*. Unpublished B.A. Hons, History Dissertation, University of Malta, May 1999, Appendix 3, pp. 87 – 100.

¹⁵ Nicolas de Nicolay, *Le Naviagationi et viaggi nella Turchia*, Anversa 1576, p. 35.

¹⁶ *The Life of Alonso de Contreras, Knight of the Military Order of St. John, Native of Madrid, written by Himself (1582 to 1633)*, Translated from the Spanish by Catherine Alison Philips, Jonathan Cape Ltd, London, 1926, p. 52.

¹⁷ Giovanni Bonello, "Fra Alonso de Contreras, Corsair and Knight of Malta", in *Histories of Malta, Ventures and Adventures*, Vol. 6, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2005, p. 112

¹⁸ N. Parise, "Bosio Antonio", *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol 13, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, 1971, p. 257.

¹⁹ Ibid. "Figlio illegittimo di Giovanni Ottone, ricevitore e poi vicecancelliere dell'Ordine gerosolimitano, nacque alla Vittoriosa nell'Isola di Malta nel 1575.

²⁰ Borg, *Birgu: A Demographic Overview 1558-1658*, 1999, p. 24. The Gozitan Caterina Bonello was described in the Church records as "moglie d'uno d' il cavalliero".

²¹ Ibid, p. 25.

In the case of Barthélemy, the name of the mother is known. It was Caterina Grec. As rightly concluded by Dr. Bonello, the woman was either a courtesan of Greek origins or could have been a Rhodite Greek. What is more important, in Malta, having children out of wedlock was no big deal. Indeed, at the time, many considered it normal. Possibly, the public was prepared to accept and “tolerate” such situations far more than our contemporary society. The birth of de Valette’s grandson was recorded by the parish priest, and indicates that everyone in Birgu knew about this child. Sixteenth-century Birgu was a small community, where everybody (like today) knew everybody else and such facts of life were very difficult to be hidden away from public scrutiny.

De Valette’s grandson was born on 1st October, 1559. On that day, the Birgu parish priest administered the rite of baptism to two other babies; both female. First to be baptised were the little girls. The Grand Master’s grandson came last and was named Matteo. According to practice during this period, in case of a legitimate birth, only the name of the father was given. The name of the mother was withheld.²² The father’s name was Gio Battista. In this case the name of Matteo’s father was given. This means that the baby was born from a legitimate relationship. But in this case, the parish priest added another interesting detail. He recorded the name of Matteo’s paternal grandfather. This was not in line with the usual practice of registration, even though, as I shall be showing, there were other instances, when reference to grandparents was included in the Baptism Acts. Matteo’s entry runs as follows:

Eode[m]

*Baptizai Matteo figlio di m(isse)r Joanni battista di fra ioam di Valetta granmaistro c[um]patres p[ri]mo ioseps caldes 2^o ioam di borges.*²³

Same date

I have baptised Matteo the son of the noble Gio Battista of Fra Giovanni di Valetta, the Grandmaster. The first godfather was Giuseppe Caldes, the second Giovanni di Borges.

In 1539, King Francis I of France instructed all the parish priests of his realm to keep a Baptism Register.²⁴ Such an ordinance would definitely influence and set a precedent in the Latin West. In fact, around 1555, all parishes in Malta were keeping these Acts. Birgu was no exception. In the early days,

²² This is practice is clearly evident in the Acts, and as I shall be explaining in this study, the name of the mother was rarely given during this period. Giving the name and surname of the father indicated legitimacy.

²³ Parish Registers, Birgu. Liber I. *Baptizatorum, Matrimonorum Mortuorumque ab anno 1558 usque ad annum 1626*, Civ. Victoriosa, f. 7.

²⁴ Jacques Dupâquier, *Histoire de la Population Française*, 2 *De La Renaissance à 1789*, puf, 1988, p. 11.

the Birgu parish priest was far more interested in recording the life-births among his flock, without making any social distinction. The Parish Registers of Births indicate a strong under registration! On certain days, the number of baptisms is relatively high, varying from 3, 4 or 5 per day. Then, there are months during which only two or three babies are baptised. It seems that in the early seventeenth century, the need was felt, in Birgu, to make a copy these Acts. This is clearly deduced from the different calligraphy and in fact, in the Register, no distinction was made between the pre-Tridentine and post-Tridentine Acts. Further analysis shows that the copyist tried to be as accurate as possible. Despite the fact that these copies were made after the Council of Trent, the copyist preserved and remained faithful to the pre-Tridentine format of the early Acts. For example, in the pre-Tridentine Acts, (those written before 1563) only the name of the father is given, excluding that of the mother. This too was the case of the Birgu Baptism Acts. The mother's name was only given in the case of an illegitimate birth. Here the father's name was excluded. It was in the Tridentine spirit that the name of both parents began to be included in the Acts. The second proof of correct copying is in listing the names of the godparents. The Council of Trent discouraged registering more than one male or more than one female as godparent. In the case of baby Matteo, he had two male godparents.

The Historical Meaning of "di" or "de"

In reading this documentation, an immediate question arises as to whether Matteo's father, Gio Battista was de Valette's son or the son of one of the Grand Master's servants or slaves. The use "*di*" meaning "*of*" after Gio Batta and before the name of Giovanni di Valetta can be problematic and has been a source of controversy in the past.

The document does not specify Gio Battista as the son of *Fra Joan di Valetta*. For this reason, the use of the Italian partitive article gave rise to a legitimate question by Prof. Godfrey Wettinger wherein he expressed his doubts that it stands for 'son of'. He suggested it could stand for one of de Valette's slaves. To prove this point, Wettinger used examples from the AOM registers, including the name of one of de Valette's slaves who was named Joanni Parisiotto.²⁵ Clearly, he was named after the Grand Master. At this stage, I do not wish to enter into lengthy ontological arguments and discuss whether the AOM documentation should be compared with the Church Baptism Records. These are entirely two different register.

The correct study and interpretation of the '*di*' should be sought within the context of the Church's registration of infants in general and the Baptism

²⁵ Godfrey Wettinger, *La Valette's Grandson (?)*, The Sunday Times, March, 1, 1998, p. 39.

Records of Birgu in particular. The study of the Church registers at Birgu reveals the exact meaning of the preposition 'di'. I think that here we have the first lexical difference that transpires with regard to the use of the same preposition 'of' in different volumes. The records seem to be making a distinction between the Latin "*de*" and its Italian variation '*di*'. The "*di*" was used in Church records to denote son of. The word '*de*' in the State Records was considered more appropriate to identify manumitted slaves.

Therefore, the use of the preposition "*di*" or "*de*" implies ownership. In early modern Europe, slaves were not the sole category of individuals who were owned by other human beings. Slaves were legally owned by their masters. Children were considered the possession of their parents. This explains why this preposition is used intermittently for both slaves and babies.

The Law gave parents legal ownership over their children. Boys were their father's property up to the age of 25, while females were legally still part of the family household up to their 22nd birthday. Furthermore, children under the prescribed age could not marry without their father's consent. Since the Church's Baptism Records were concerned primarily with the baptism of babies, it follows that the Church was faced, first and foremost, with babies who were the legal possession of their father. The baptism of slaves constituted an exception and was never the norm. More importantly, there was no legal provision, which obliged owners to baptise their slave. The only difference was that the possession of slaves was not governed by any age limit. Secondly, they constituted an exception rather than a rule in society. Few were those individuals who could afford to keep slaves.

As for the Knight Hospitallers, they formed part of an institution, which bound them to their religious vows of celibacy and poverty (the AOM volumes offer ample examples of this) reflects this reality. In the Knights world, paternity was not admitted and the word '*de*' predominantly indicated ownership of slaves. Babies born to anyone of the Religion were always considered to have been fathered outside the legal framework of matrimony. Consequently, they were illegitimate and could not be owned by the father. For this reason, the name of the father is always excluded from the records of the Baptism Acts. Indeed, the primary aim was that of registering the actual baptism and not to record paternity.

This legal concept is reflected well in the Birgu registers and numerous examples could be mentioned where the Baptism Registers clearly show that the '*di*' in front of an individual's name meant son of, rather than slave of.

Again, the many surnames carrying the suffix 'de' reflect this form of parental relationship. Sixteenth-century Malta experienced strong immigration from Europe and the Greek world. Many of the European migrants carried surnames too difficult to pronounce by the local clergy. Therefore, the preferred form of identifying these individuals was by indicating their father, through the use of the suffix 'di' or 'de'. This was the case, for example, with the De Marco family. Luca Raguseo was one of the first De Marco's to come to Malta from Ragusa on the Adriatic, present-day Dubrovnik. His son Marco was either called Raguseo or De Luca. Marco's son Matteo was again identified by the surname of Raguseo or De Marco. Matteo's descendants continued to be identified by the surname of De Marco but the surname De Luca also survived within the family. The famous eighteenth century doctor, Giuseppe De Marco, was given the surname of De Luca in his Marriage Act.²⁶

The Greek community did not use surnames. However, the use of surnames in Western Europe forced the parish priests to give them one. They were either identified with their ethnicity e.g. Greco or with their paternity, as in the case of the surname Degiorgio or Demetrio. Moreover, the Greeks, in common with many other foreigners, were also identified by their country of origin. Thus, a person could be identified, besides as Greco, with the island of Zachintos or "Del Giate", or "Di Candia". The marriage, at Bormla, of Pancosti Degiorgio to Caterina Bugeja offers another example in the use of 'de' for creating new surnames. Pancosti was described of foreign origin; the term used was "estero". In reality, Degiorgio Pancosti had been married before, so much so that in the same Marriage Deed, he is described as widower of Maria. When his first wife died, Pancosti was given the surname of Greco (Grech) while his name was written as Paniotti. Paniotti, being an oriental, had no surname and the priests identified him with his ethnic origin (Greco) or with his father's name, Giorgio. In fact, the Marriage Act of Pancosti to Caterina also contains the name of his father and mother. The father was named Giorgio, the mother Maria.²⁷

Therefore, there can be no doubt that for Church records, the use of 'di' or 'de' carried the meaning of son of. On the other hand, freed slaves also used "de" in front of their surname. But there was a crucial difference. Free individuals carried the 'de' or 'di' in front of their father's name. Freed slaves often used the 'de' in front of the surname of their former master. Thus, for instance, Stefano a baptised slave of the Mdina-based family of Manduca married Vennera Grech of Mqabba at Bir Miftuh on the 28th August, 1566.²⁸

²⁶ Simon Mercieca, "The Possession of Titles and forms of Address in Early Modern Malta", *Humanitas, Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Vol. II, 2003, p. 53.

²⁷ Simon Mercieca, "The Possession of Titles and forms of Address in Early Modern Malta", *Humanitas, Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Vol. II, 2003, p. 53.

²⁸ P.A. Gudja, *Liber Bapt. Conf. Matr. Def. 1555-1675*, Vol. I, f. 705.

The Marriage Act specifically states that Stefano had been manumitted by his master Antonio Manduca. However, when it came to baptizing Stefano's children, the former master's name no longer appears in the Birth Register of his daughter Agata on the 14th March, 1568.²⁹ It should be pointed out that the manumitted slave Stefano never had his name recorded as Stefano de Antonio Manduca. He is just called either Manduca or De Manduca.

Therefore, per se, the use of 'de' or 'di' is not the only gauge to identify Gio Batta. The document itself carries important evidence, which definitely recognizes Gio Batta as the son of de Valette.

The Slaves of the Grand Master de Valette

Parish priests always took the precaution to state the social condition of slaves. This was applicable also to former slaves, who were described in the Parish Acts by the word *manumissum* (freed slave). Those who were captives were called *servum* or *serva*, *schiavus* or *schiaua*, *ethiopicus* or *ethiopica*, *negro* or *negra*. Grand Master de Valette's slaves were no exception. On the 1st December, 1561, the parish priest Matteo Fava baptised Francesco, a slave of the Grand Master. The wording of the Act reads as follows:

*Ego do[n] Matteo Fava baptizavit] ad Franc[escum] servo di granmasteri.*³⁰

(I, Don Matteo Fava have administered the rite of baptism to Francesco, slave of the Grand Master).

The wording of the Act is once again of particular interest. In this epoch, slaves were considered as property of the Order rather than the property of an individual knight. In fact when Grand Master de Valette baptised Francesco, one of his slaves mentioned above, the "di" appears in front of his position of Grand Master, and not in front of his name. More importantly, the parish priest showed no interest to reveal the name of the 'master'. Here one has to ask the question why Francesco had his social status clearly identified but the name of his master withheld. The same priest used a different yardstick vis-à-vis Gio Batta. The obvious explanation is because Gio Batta's status was not that of a slave but that of a son: the son of de Valette.

Moreover, one should highlight that in this case, the parish priest refused to honour either Matteo or Gio Batta by giving them a surname, as was customary for the sons of legitimately married foreigners, who had some

²⁹ P.A. Gudja, *Liber Bapt. Conf. Matr. Def. 1555-1675*, Vol. 1, f. 95.

³⁰ Parish Registers, Birgu, *Liber I. Baptizatorum, Matrimoniorum Mortuorumque ab anno 1558 usque ad annum 1626*, Civ. Victoriosa, f. 21v.

difficulty in establishing their surname. Here, the nearest option would be to fall back on the "De" in front of the name of the mother. But she failed to do so. The reason would be that the priest wanted to ensure that the identity of the child would be closely associated with that of the Grand Master.

As for Gio Batta, he certainly could not be considered a slave. Slaves were prohibited to marry. The Catholic Church was following ancient Roman law that forbade slaves from marrying because they were not free individuals and therefore could not fulfil their marriage obligations with responsibility. Joseph Lupi discussed this subject at length in his book on Catholic marriage rites and rituals.³¹ This ordinance had the positive effect in that in order to marry slaves had to first gain their freedom by being manumitted by their owners. Their situation was no different to that of other normal free human beings. As already indicated, free men and women, up to a determined age, needed their father's permission to marry. The only difference being that free individuals could marry without such consent after reaching the established age. Should they wish to marry before this age, but without seeking the consent of their parents, free persons could do so only by deceiving some priest or other. The usual method was to stop a priest in the middle of a street, and the couple would pronounce the ritual words of marriage. In so doing, the couple were considered married, though it was still defined a clandestine marriage.³² The slaves, however, could not resort to such methods. Therefore, the above-mentioned slave, Joanni Parisotto, could not be the same Giovanni Battista of this Baptism Acts, for the simple reason that he was still a slave in 1563: Parisotto was only freed on 3rd August 1568.³³

On the other hand, it was difficult to prohibit slaves (especially females) from having sex or a sexual relationship (perhaps even a forced one) with their masters. The procreation of children was a natural consequence but the offspring, as already indicated, were always deemed illegitimate. This was in line with tradition. These babies were considered born out of wedlock and therefore were registered under the name of their mother; never under that of their father. Therefore, had Matteo been a slave's offspring, the usual rule would apply. He should have been registered under the name of his mother rather than that of his father. Therefore, Matteo's father, Giovanni Battista, was legitimately married but the Acts fail to reveal the name of his wife.

State laws regulated babies born to female slaves. The approach adopted by the Hospitaller Order was to consider a baby born to a female slave to be

³¹ Joseph Lupi, *L-Istorja tal-Liturgija*, Malta, 1992, p. 204.

³² Mercieca, 2002. I discussed this point in the chapter about marriage in Malta of my unpublished Ph.D Dissertation.

³³ Wettinger, *La Valette Grandson (?)*, p. 39.

born free. If he was born nine months after the time the mother had been captured and enslaved, the baby was considered to have been fathered by a free male person. Thus, the baby had to be given his freedom.³⁴ This was the sole instance for both the State and the Church when the mother's name and identity was given precedence over that of the father! It should be remembered that harsh penalties awaited those male slaves who indulged in sexual relationships with locals or other slaves. Such laws took into consideration the fact that the paternity and freedom from slavery was linked to the identity of the father.

A detailed study of the Acts of Birgu reveals that, three years later, Gio Batta had another child. The father's name was shortened to Battista while the baby was given the name of Gio Maria.³⁵ Once again, the father carried no official surname. While some elements of doubt remain, all the collateral evidence points out that these two were the same person. In both Acts, the surname is omitted. However, this time the parish priest even left a blank space for the surname. The interval of two years between the birth of Matteo and that of Gio Maria, and the presence of only the father's name without any reference to his surname, strongly indicates that Gio Maria is the brother of Matteo. The fact that during this period there was only one Battista (Gio Batta) who had his children baptised in Birgu further strengthens the claim that the two were one and the same person. The problem that Gio Batta faced was whether to use the de Valette surname seems to have repeated itself in the second birth. Since Gio Batta's birth was not legitimized, he could not use or be called with the surname of his father, the Grand Master. This could explain why the parish priest of Birgu, once again avoided to write down any surname. Yet once more, Battista carries no reference to any state of bondage. This is a clear indication that Battista was a married individual.

In reading these entire social '*minuets*', one can understand why the parish priest avoided giving the surname of the father in both instances. The reason was linked to the state of illegitimacy and social standing. Illegitimate babies were recorded under the name of their mother. However, the surname of the mother was not always given either. In fact, a look at the records of this period, the illegitimate children carry just the name of their mother without any reference to the surname. In France illegitimate children, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, used to take the name of their mother as surname. Malta had a similar system but in taking up the surname of the mother, more often than not, the *De* was added in front. This can explain why, the parish priest of Birgu avoids giving a surname to Matteo in the Baptism

³⁴ Ibid. Godfrey Wettinger, *Slavery in the Islands of Malta and Gozo ca. 1000-1812*, Publishers Enterprises Group (2002), Malta, pp. 469 – 471.

³⁵ P.A. Birgu, Liber 1, f. 30r. He was born on 28th February 1563.

Acts. He preferred to link the child's name directly with his father, as his identity was known in town.

Furthermore, confirmation that Grand Master de Valette had a slave by the name of Gio Batta excludes the possibility that the one mentioned in the Acts at Birgu is one of his slaves or even former slaves. The reason is twofold. First, the identification of a slave of the Grand Master de Valette by the name of Giovanni makes it quite unlikely that Gio Batta would have been freed. If, in 1558, he was still a slave, he could not be the same person because slaves were not allowed to marry. Secondly, and most important, once a slave was set free, there was no need to mention the name of his former master. In fact, no instance has ever been found in the Church Registers of freed or manumitted slaves being identified with the full name of his former master, when the parish priest came to record the baptism of their offspring. As already explained, the only identification they needed was to identify themselves with the surname of their former owner.

Therefore, had Gio Batta been a former slave of de Valette, he would have probably carried the surname De Valetta but would never have had the name of his owner in full. As argued by Dr. Bonello, and confirmed by the Act, the Grand Master's surname was de Valette³⁶ and he was known among the Birgu community by this surname. Thus, in this case, there was a change, since the "de" prefix in front of surnames of freed slaves had been dropped, giving rise to the popular surname, in Malta, of Valletta. Incidentally, the surname Valletta appears in Birgu only in the early seventeenth century. One could be tempted to ask whether there was a change in surname. Tracing the origins of the Valletta surname could make us understand the whys and wherefores of what sort of surname was used by Gio Batta and, if there was any change, how his offspring continued to write their surname. It should be noted that persons of a noble lineage in France who had their surname beginning with the preposition "de" adopted the custom to write the first consonant in miniscule and kept the "de" separate from the rest of the surname. This was done to emphasize their aristocratic lineage and perhaps to distinguish themselves from all the rest, who like the slaves and the illegitimate, incorporated the proposition 'de' into their surname and thus, the first letter of their surname started with a capital "D".

Moreover, the use of the preposition "de" by slaves in front of the surname of their former master could explain why important Medieval Maltese aristocratic families made slight variations in their family name. Here I am specifically referring to the Inguanez family. The late medieval name of this

³⁶ Giovanni Bonello, "Is it La Valette or De Valette?", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, December 23, 2012 and "De Valette or De La Valette", *The Sunday Times of Malta*, January 20, 2013.

family began with a 'de' suffix and was always written Deguanes. However, in early modern times, the family name was changed into the version of Inguanez. Could this be a reaction of this family not to have its surname identified with that given to slaves?

A textual analysis of the Acts of Birgu offers the next proof that Giovanni Battista is indeed an offspring of de Valette. On the 25th of November 1565, the parish priest of Birgu wrote that he had baptised Domenico, son of "Antonio di Lauro Spiziali". Lauro is the grandfather of Domenico and this could be proved by the fact that on the 21st January 1563, Antonio had another son named Domenico. In this Act, Antonio was given simply as Antonio Spiziali. The baby born in 1565 was being named after his elder brother who most probably had in the mean time passed away. Without any doubt, the use of "di" in front of Lauro as in the case of the Act regarding Matteo stands for the Latin word "filium" meaning son of. Moreover, this Antonio Spiziali was an owner of slaves. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible at the time in Catholic Malta, for a freed slave to end up, owner of slaves. Moreover, the case of Spiziali shows that sometimes, though rare, the parish priest of Birgu referred to grandparents in these Baptismal Acts. Whenever this was done, it was always in relation to babies born to the elite.

Finally, Birgu was not the only parish where priests used the partitive "di" to denote paternity. A textual analysis of the Parish Records offers ample examples of similar stories. The following are two such examples, which have been taken from the Baptism Acts of Zebbug. On 15 October 1631, Gio Pietro, the son of Gio Maria Felici, was baptised at Zebbug. The parish priest registered the kinship as follows: *Gio Pietro filium* (that is son of) *Gio Maria Felici di Domenico et Antonina Giugali*.³⁷ The same structure is again found in a Baptism Act dated 5 January, 1633.³⁸ In this case, the godfather of baby Catarina was registered as Maestro Giuseppe Vassallo di Maestro Marco. In both cases, there should be no doubt that the "di" was referring to the parents.

The Title 'Misser'

It is also interesting to note that when, the name of the Grand Master was mentioned, his son, Gio Batta was given the title "misser". The use of such a word could be the clue as to de Valette's paternity. The parish priest only wrote the letter 'm' in front of the name of Gio Batta.³⁹ A. Cappelli describes the use of this letter "m" in Italian documents as the abbreviation of the

³⁷ P.A. Zebbug, *Libro di Battesimi dalli 4 Ottobre 1615 sino li 10 Febraio 1636 B*, Vol. 2, p. 206.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 217.

³⁹ A. Cappelli, *Lexicon Abbreviatorum. Dizionario di Abbreviature Latine ed Italiane*, Manuali Hoepli, Milan, 1999, p. 210; Joseph M. Brincat, 'La Valette's grandson?', *The Times*, Thursday, February 5, 1998, p. 8.

word “messer” meaning noble or a respectable person. In Malta, whenever such an abbreviation was used in full in the Church Parish records, it was normally spelled as “misser” rather than “messer”⁴⁰ and for this reason, I am sticking to the local amanuensis. Such form of address completely excludes the notion that Gio Battista was a slave. Instead, it proves that he was a direct descendant of the valiant Grand Master. The origins of the word “misser” comes from the Norman “Messire” or “mon sire” my lord, which in turn gave us the Maltese word “missier” which is now used to mean simply “father”.⁴¹ The French pronouncement of the word shows that the terminology used in the Church Registers is of a French derivation.

In Maltese ecclesiastical language, this word “misser” is not used in the Italian sense of “messer” but follows the French form of address, as whenever, it is given in full in the registers, it is constantly written as “misser” and never in the Italian format of “messer”. In sixteenth-century France, this title was often used in addressing ‘respectable’ members of society such as priests and other high-ranking individuals.

The higher echelons, particularly, the nobles and higher clergy were addressed as Monseigneur. At the same time, historical instances show that the use of “titles” or better still designations was not frowned on when sons of the nobility were born out of wedlock. Society still respected them even if, their birth was not legitimized. Legitimization was sought for other legal reasons, normally related to inheritance or acceding to the ranks of the aristocracy or to enter exclusive religious orders such as the Order of Malta, which restricted entrance only to legitimate sons of the nobility.

The Acts of Birgu, themselves offer and corroborate such an explanation. On the same page where Matteo’s baptism is recorded, there are other individuals parading this form of address. One of them is notary Vincenzo Bonaventura and Antonio di Lauria, an owner of slaves. On the other hand, not all the mentioned parents or godfathers of Birgu carried this designation. In particular, not one of the captives or the freed slaves, who were baptised in Birgu in that same period, was given such title. It was never possible for a slave to be addressed in such a way, irrespective of whether his master had freed him or not. Slaves were not allowed to carry high-ranking titles. The “misser” title was of a higher rank than that of a ‘maestro’ in sixteenth-century Malta but of a lesser standing than Monseigneur. The latter title was only used at the time in Malta for the Bishop or the Grand Master, and as in the rest of Europe, it was never used at this time across the board for mere clergy and high society at large. Instead, persons of high standing in society, such as members of the local

⁴⁰ Mercieca, 2003, p. 45.

⁴¹ Joseph Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, The University of Malta, 1994, p. 174.

nobility or professional persons, such as notaries, doctors or lawyers, were addressed as “misser”, which interchangeably had the meaning of Sir, Your Honour, gentleman or lord. The Malta’s Parish Acts show that ‘misser’ was equated with that of the minor members of the local nobility and it was more elevated than the other frequently used form of “maestro”.⁴²

Therefore, the use of the word ‘misser’ excludes the possibility of the state of bondage in relation to Matteo’s father. More importantly, it was unthinkable, in sixteenth-century Europe, to have slaves identified with the same social honours given to important town dwellers or the elite members of society.

Conclusion

The obvious next question to be answered concerns the age of Giovanni Battista at the birth of his son. In 1559, de Valette was about 65 years old. In all probability Giovanni Battista was more than twenty when his son was born. Average age of marriage in this period was about 21 for men. Therefore, the noble Gio Battista could either have been born in Rhodes or in Malta. His date of birth could help us to answer if de Valette’s offspring was born prior to de Valette’s having joined the Order or not. This point still needs to be addressed, even if it is highly improbable that he was born before de Valette joined the Order for the simple reason that Jean de Valette was born around 1494, had entered the Order very early in life (Langue de Provence) and would have been 26 when Rhodes was taken.⁴³

Nor has the fate of Matteo been determined in the Acts or that of his two children, who were baptised at Birgu. Nonetheless, the Birgu Acts only mention two more individuals with the name Matteo. One is Matteo Portelli. Unfortunately, the name of the father is not given. He married Margherita on the 26th March, 1588⁴⁴ but one may rightly excludes any connection with the Grand Master’s grandson. The other is Matteo Purbes, who was a foreigner and a painter who settled in Birgu. He married Giulia on the 30th July, 1588.⁴⁵ Perhaps, Matteo got married at another parish. His life history, definitely still needs to be explored in order to learn more about the life history of the Great Siege hero, Grandmaster Jean de Valette, who incidentally, as the Parish Priest of Birgu, Matteo Fava, reveals in this Act, was known among the population of this town under the Italian version of his name, Giovanni.

⁴² Mercieca, 2003, p. 45.

⁴³ Victor Mallia Milanese,

⁴⁴ P.A. Birgu, *Liber I. Baptizatorum, Matrimoniorum Mortuorumque ab anno 1558 usque ad annum 1626*, Civ. Victoriosa, f. 311v.

⁴⁵ P.A. Birgu, *Liber I. Baptizatorum, Matrimoniorum Mortuorumque ab anno 1558 usque ad annum 1626*, Civ. Victoriosa, f. 312v.