

SOCIETY OF ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY AND NATURAL SCIENCES (1866-68)

Now that this Society is firmly set on its feet it is interesting to pause awhile and to assess the work of a similar Society which flourished in Malta about ninety years ago. This was the *Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences*, which was founded in 1866 and whose activities came to a premature end in 1868.

The circumstances which led to the formation of this Society were explained by the President, Dr. Arthur Anderson, F.S.A.S., Inspector General of Hospitals, in his opening speech at the inaugural meeting held at the Public Library on the 8th January, 1866. Dr. Anderson said: "It will be found that although Arts, Manufactures, Commerce, Agriculture and General Literature have in Malta Societies which meet for the advancement of their special interests, the Archaeology, History and Geology of Malta have had no such representation. Attempts have been made during the last three years to unite some of the societies already in existence and to extend the field of their operations, but such attempts have not met with success". For this reason four gentlemen, of whom one was Maltese, met on the 11th December, 1865 in the house of D. A. Commissary Furse, at No. 54 Sda. Zaccaria, Valletta, "for the purpose of investigating the expediency of forming a society for the study and advancement of these sciences." On the proposal of Cav. Antonio Schembri, Consul for Belgium and President of the Agrarian Society, it was decided that one of the objects of the new society would be to study and investigate the History of these Islands. Three other Preliminary Meetings were held on the 18th, 23rd and 27th December, at which Regulations for the management of the society were discussed and approved. Meanwhile various people had signified their willingness to join the Society.

The object of the Society was declared to be "the advancement of archaeological and geological research in the Island of Malta and its dependencies, the study of the History and of the Natural History of the same, and the formation of a local Museum." The Regulations also provided for monthly lectures to be held by the Society, and all papers read and approved for publication became the copyright property of the Society for a period of 12 months. Papers not approved for publication could not be published under the name of the Society without permission. (Art. xvi). All papers were to be examined by a special committee appointed "to decide whether or not they are to be read or published. Any memoir authorised to be published will be printed in the language in which it has been read (Art. xvii).

The inaugural lecture was given by Dr. Leith Adams on the 8th January 1866. This paper outlined "the progress and present state of the archaeological and natural sciences of Malta and the necessary requirements to their complete development." Dr. Adams was specially interested in Geology, and he continued to send papers to

the Society even when he left Malta. We learn from the Minutes of the Society (I) that on Tuesday, 20th February, 1866, Dr. Adams gave his lecture "on the late excavations of Fossil Remains and their bearing on the rock formation of the Island." Dr. Adams's second lecture was rather long and it was devoted to the Geology of Malta. As he had already left Malta it was given in a series of five lectures which were read by Capt. Strickland and, following the latter's death, by Mr. C. A. Wright. On the 31st December 1867 it was decided to print the 2nd and 3rd parts of the lecture and at the last meeting of the Society, held on the 18th May, 1868, it was agreed that the 4th and 5th parts of Dr. Adams's Ms. should be printed after being submitted to a Committee of Revision. From the Secretary's Report on the Society's work during the second year we learn that "Dr. Adams's discoveries in Maltese Geology have formed part of the Transactions of the British Association meeting for the present year".

Other lectures on topics of various interest were given. On the 20th February, 1866, following Dr. Adams's lecture, Asst. Surgeon Welsh read a paper on a Tomb and Shrine discovered near Qrendi by Dr. Adams and himself. The second part of this lecture was delivered on the 21st March 1866. On the 13th March 1866 Dr. A. A. Caruana read a report "on the shells and Mss of the late Mr. Joseph Mamo" and Dr. Caruana was asked to take steps for the publication of the Mss., asking from the Society the necessary assistance. Dr. Caruana thanked the Society and expressed the hope that the Mss. would be printed by Government. On the 27th December 1866 Dr. Gavino Gulia gave his first lecture on "Flora Medica Maltese". Apparently his second lecture, which the Secretary reported as being ready for delivery in 1868, was not given. On the 30th March 1868 D. A. C. General Furse read a lecture in illustration of the Plan of Hagar Qim and photographs of these ruins, and Dr. A. A. Caruana exhibited fossil remains of a Hyena found for the first time in Gozo.

In the report for the 2nd year the Secretary mentioned that "during the present year a Mr. Achille Ferris has published a book full of interesting descriptions on the churches of these Islands". He also said that "a catalogue of birds found in Malta has just been published by Mr. W. Grant with their English, Latin and Maltese names. Mr. Grant intends following this catalogue with another work giving various information on the habits of the birds that visit these islands and the seasons of the year when they are to be met with".

In perusing the minutes and papers of this Society we were pleased to find the name of the Maltese historian, Dr. G. A. Vassallo, among its members. The following letter, which takes a special significance today when we are beginning to draw a distinction between the History of the Order and the History of the Maltese People, was sent for the Society's consideration in April, 1866:

Onoratissimo Sig. D. Furse

Pregho V.S. Ill.ma compiacersi di presentare alla Società Archeologica, di cui è

(1) R.M.L. Ms. 588, *Archaeological and Geological Society of Malta: Register of the Proceedings of Monthly and General Meetings from foundation of the Society*. See also Ms. 589, *Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences: Letters and Reports received*, Vol. No. 1; and R.M.L. Misc. 416 (11), *Regulations of the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences of Malta*.

il degno segretario, un mio breve cenno biografico intorno all'illustre archeologo maltese Antonio Bosio, che riceverà colla presente.

Bramo nel tempo stesso che la S.V. faccia noto alla Società (seppure la cosa non è già alla medesima nota) che molto è qui desiderata una storia di Malta in lingua inglese. Vi sono dei libri inglesi che hanno per titolo "Storia di Malta", essi però non trattano sotto quello che la storia dell'Ordine di Malta. Doppio sarebbe il pregio di tale storia, uscendo essa da una società dotta stabilita nell'isola stessa. In quanto a materiali, l'erudito Sig. Bibliotecario, Dr. C. Vassallo, nelle cose di Malta versatissimo, un dei membri dell'accademia, ne fornirebbe quanto parrà necessario. Farebbe lo stesso il sottoscritto (socio onorario della medesima) del poco che può. Non v'è tipografo in Inghilterra nè in Malta, il quale rifiuterebbe il Ms di quell'istoria, ove pure la Società istessa, od alcun membro d'essa, stampar non volesse a conto proprio.

La prego perdonarmi la libertà presa, e credermi,

Della S.V. Ill.ma

U.mo D.mo Ser.e

DR. G. A. VASSALLO.

Valletta

30 Aprile, 1866.

In the minutes of the meeting held on the 16th May, we read that "A letter was written from Dr. G. A. Vassallo recommending a reprint of Bosio and the English History of Malta. On a proposal by Dr. C. Vassallo seconded by Cap. Strickland a Committee composed of Dr. C. Vassallo, Dr. G. A. Vassallo, Captain Strickland and Mr. C. A. Wright was named to consider how a work on the History of Malta should be prepared and allot to different members the writings of the several sections". The biographical note on Antonio Bosio attached to G. A. Vassallo's letter is not preserved with the other papers of the Society. A history of Malta on the lines envisaged by the Society is still a desideratum, though the publication of *Malta and Gibraltar* in 1913, with contributions by various local writers on their speciality, was certainly a step in the right direction. On the 30th March, 1868 the Society unanimously accepted a motion by Dr. Cesare Vassallo "that mention be made in the proceedings of this meeting of the regret felt by the Society for the death of Dr. G. A. Vassallo (who died on the 28th instant) one of the members of this Society, a gentleman of great literary merits and who had taken a great interest when it was proposed that the Society should form a programme for the publication of a History of Malta."

The Society did not outlive its third year. Its leading members either died or else, being Service people, had to leave the Island. Looking back over a period of ninety years, we cannot but feel grateful to the Society for their pioneer work and for pointing out the importance of a corporate effort to promote historical and kindred studies in these Islands.

J. C. P.