

The De Malta Genoese Counts of Malta: c. 1192 – c. 1320

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A number of prominent researchers into Maltese history have expressed their ignorance as to what was the juridical foundation of the claims by the De Malta family to the County of Malta. Others have shown hesitation in assigning clear connexions between the various members of the family. Thus, Enrico Mazzaresse Fardella in his ground-breaking work on the counts of Sicily, questions the *reale consistenza di quel feudo [di Malta] e il suo significato giuridico*.¹ So also, Henri Bresc, when discussing the will of Guglielmo de Malta and placing it in its historical context admits: *E' vero che non sappiamo ancora l'origine della famiglia comitale de Malta*, while at the same time, in view of the appearance in their inheritance of the *Casale Bulfida* (present-day Francofonte in the province of Catania), intuiting some connexion with the Fimetta family of Lentini – *una relazione rimasta da chiarire*.² Anthony Luttrell, too, confuses Andrea or Andriolo de Malta with another Genoese, Andriolo de Mari.³ In two recent publications, Laura Sciascia, editing several 'Sicilian' documents in the *Archivio de la Corona d' Aragón* at Barcellona,⁴ comes up with a number of documents that have direct bearing on our subject and go a long way in providing missing tesserae in the mosaic of our knowledge.

It is recalled how Margarito of Brindisi, an Apulian pirate of Greek origin from Xante, had become Admiral of Sicily in 1184 under King William II (1166-1189), and had continued to serve under King Tancred (1190-1194) by whom he was created first Count of Malta sometime in 1192 in reward for his excellent services. Following the death of Tancred in February 1194 and during the brief interlude of the reign of Tancred's minor son William III under the regency of his mother Sibilla, Emperor Henry VI, abetted by his Genoese allies, invaded Sicily, took Palermo and was crowned at Palermo Cathedral on Christmas Day of that same year 1194.⁵ The first

1. E. Mazzaresse Fardella, *I feudi comitali di Sicilia dai normanni agli aragonesi*, Milano 1974, 19.
2. H. Bresc, 'Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano', *Melita Historica*, vi/3 (1974), 315.
3. A. Luttrell, 'The House of Aragon and Malta: 1282-1530', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, iv/2 (1970) 159.
4. L. Sciascia, *Pergamene Siciliane dell' Archivio della Corona d' Aragona*, Palermo 1994. *Idem*, *Le Donne e i Cavalier. Gli affanni e gli agi*, Sicania, Messina 1993.
5. E. Jamison, *Amiral Eugenius of Sicily*, London 1957, 54-5, 95, 120-1. I. Peri, *Uomini città e campagne in Sicilia dall' XI al XIII secolo*, Roma 1990 120-1. C. Garufi, 'Margarito di Brindisi, conte di Malta e ammiraglio del Re di Sicilia', *Miscellanea di Archeologia, Storia e Filologia dedicata a Antonio Salinas*, Palermo 1907, 278.

document published by Sciascia and dated 23 November 1194, a full month before King Henry's coronation, shows the monarch already confirming to Guglielmo Grasso, a Genoese,⁶ and to his heirs in perpetuity the County of Malta with all its rights while granting them a house in Messina belonging to the royal curia, known as the *funduq-domum nostram Messanne que fundicus dicebatur*.⁷ The tide of fortune had obviously turned against Margarito who was to end his days blinded in a German prison after a revolt in 1197.⁸ By 1198 and following the death of Henry VI, it was Grasso's turn to clash with the monarchy and be declared by Empress Constantia, Queen of Sicily, and by her four-year old son Frederick, King of Sicily, *inimicum nostrum*. In the same breath, it was found convenient at the time that the Maltese islands be promised reintegration within the royal demanium 'for ever'.⁹ The empty promise was very soon to be forgotten and by 1203 Guglielmo Grasso's son-in-law Arrigo, nicknamed *Pescatore*, a pirate turned admiral of Sicily, appears to have somehow inherited the title of Count of Malta. After having faithfully served his master for a score of years using Malta as the base of his operations, in 1222 Arrigo fell out with the emperor and lost the title of Count of Malta. His services to the emperor, however, were not easily replaced and he was partially reinstated soon afterwards retaining the title of Count of Malta but not jurisdiction over the *castrum* of Malta.¹⁰ By May 1232 Arrigo was presumably dead as the title was then being used by his son Nicoloso, for instance, when signing a treaty between Genoa and Arles.¹¹

It is not clear why the same title was not adopted a decade later when Nicoloso appears as one of the treasurers of the Commune of Genoa in 1243.¹² This period coincides with the time when the Maltese islands were being governed by Paolino de Malta and,¹³ on his death, by his successor Giliberto Abbate.¹⁴ It is possible that this was a time during which the islands had been returned to imperial control by Frederick

6. Giardina, *Capitoli e Privilegi di Messina*, Palermo 1937, 29 fn. 3.

7. Sciascia 1994, Doc. 2, pp. 41-2.

8. Jamison, 130.

9. Th. Kölzer (ed.), *Constantiae Imperatricis et Reginae Siciliae Diplomata (1195-1198)*, Köln/Wien 1983, Doc. 66 (Nov. 1198), pp. 237-40.

10. D. Abulafia, 'Henry Count of Malta and his Mediterranean Activities: 1203-1230', in: A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, 104-125.

11. Sciascia 1993, 74.

12. C. Imperiale di Sant'Angelo, *Annali Genovesi di Caffaro e de' suoi continuatori*, iii, Rome 1923, 140-1.

13. A.T. Luttrell, 'Frederick II and Paolino de Malta: 1235', *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 55/56 (1976) 405-9, and texts of 1239-40 in: J.-L.-A. Huillard-Bréholles, *Friderici II Historia Dilomatica*, Paris 1861, vol.1, pp. 524-5; vol.2, pp. 931-2, 969-70.

14. A.T. Luttrell, 'Giliberto Abbate's Report on Malta: Circa 1241', *Proceedings of History Week 1993*, Malta 1997, pp. 1-29.

II, a reintegration that is only attested to in later documentation.¹⁵ One questions the relation, if any, Paolino de Malta may have had with the rest of the De Maltas. It is possible, may be even probable, that in the same way that Arrigo, Nicoloso and their descendants were referred to as De Malta, when their real surname was de Castro or Castello,¹⁶ by virtue of their intimate association with Malta, so too Paolino may have had a different surname and that De Malta was a further common appellative by which he was known. To return to Nicoloso, following the death of Frederick II in December 1250 and the succession to the throne by his son Conrad who, from Germany, left his Sicilian affairs in the hands of Frederick's natural son Manfred, it appears that Nicoloso at the head of a Genoese faction in Malta engaged in otherwise undefined activities that ran counter to Manfred's interests. It was only in July 1257 that a peace treaty between Manfred and the Genoese was signed in Melfi that patched up the situation and Nicoloso was to be reinvested with the title of Count of Malta but, like his father, not with control of the *castrum*.¹⁷ Thereafter, and for a long time, Nicoloso retained the title even under the Angevin regime with which he sympathized.¹⁸

This much has been known. Sciascia's next document, the will of Simon Fimetta of Calatafimi and inhabitant of Salemi, dated 5 January 1281, reveals his connexion with the De Malta and with Count Nicoloso, in particular.¹⁹ Simon, who is about to travel to Greece, feels more secure to have drawn up his will before his departure. In it he bequeaths, *inter alia*, a thousand gold *uncie* to Guglielmo de Malta and to his brother Roberto de Malta, his nephews and sons of his late sister Aloysia from her marriage to the late Perinus, described as first-born son of Nicoloso Count of Malta:

Tenetur predictis Guillelmo et domino Roberto [de Malta] fratribus nepotibus suis in unciis auri mille promissis ... nobili quondam Perino primogenito egregii Nicolosi comitis Malte patri ipsorum Guillelmi et Roberti nomine dotis pro nobile quondam domina Aloysia sorore sua matre ipsorum Guillelmi et Roberti tempore quo dictus Perinus duxit eamdem dominam Aloysiam in uxorem ...

15. Text of 19 April 1283 confirming the privileges of reannexation to the royal demanium granted earlier by Empress Constantia and by Emperor Frederick: *confirmantes eis privilegia Imperatricis Constance et Imperatoris Frederici per que homines ipsos cum eisdem insulis in eorum demanium et dominium assumpserunt*: G. Silvestri, *De Rebus Regni Siciliae: 9 Settembre 1282- 26 Agosto 1283* (Palermo 1882), pp. 422-3, Doc. CCCLX. The reference to Frederick's privilege could not have been the same as the earlier one issued jointly with his mother Constanca in November 1198 (fn. 9 *supra*) as he was only elected emperor in 1215.
16. Sciascia 1993, 59.
17. Text of the relevant part of the confirmation of the treaty, dated 22 March 1259, in S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Pt. II: Documents at the State Archives, Palermo. No. 1: Cancelleria Regia: 1259-1400*, Malta 1999, Doc. 1.
18. V. Laurenza, 'Malta nei documenti angioini del R. Archivio di Napoli', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, v/ 1-4 (1934), Doc. I (20 March 1270): *Ex parte Nicolosi Comitis Maltensis fidelis nostri*; *ibid.*, Doc. XIV (7 February 1271) and *infra*.
19. Sciascia 1994, Doc. 24.

The real estate constituting the rest of the bequest is also relevant and of interest. It includes the *casalia* of Militelli, Flumenfrigidum and Bulfida. This information allows us to reconstruct the first ‘half’ of the De Malta family tree (*vide infra*).

It is worth noting how Simon Fimetta came about the property he was bequeathing. He himself had received them from his aunt, another Aloysia Fimetta, of Lentini, in a donation dated 14 June 1270. Further to the three *casalia* mentioned, Simon had also received from his aunt two other *casalia*, namely Scordia superior (soprana) and Murgo, besides other property in Lentini and elsewhere.²⁰ Fourteen years after this donation, Aloysia was still alive but, nearing her end, she drew up her last will and testament, dated 11 September 1284, which altered drastically her earlier dispositions:²¹

Aloysia Phimecta de Lentini iacens in lecto gravi infirmitate detenta ... instituit ... heredes suos nobiles viros Guillelmus de Malta et dominum Robbertum de Malta militem fratres nepotes suos super bonis suis pheudalibus et burgensatibus ... videlicet: Casale unum quod dicitur Militellum, item casale unum quod dicitur Scordia superior, item casale alterum quod dicitur Flumenfrigidum ..., item casale alterum quod dicitur Bulfida et tenimentum terrarum quod dicitur Murgum.

This change of mind was, perhaps, provoked by the fact, known from the same will, that Simon de Calatafimo was then confined *in carcere de casibus Militelli, Flumenfrigidi, Bulfide et Scordie superioris*. The same will reveals a plethora of other relations in the Fimetta family, including a *domina Machalda soror dicti Guillelmi [de Malta]*.

The next document of interest is the will of Guglielmo de Malta who lies dying in the Gozo *castrum* on 8 February 1299,²² which document had been discovered earlier by Bresc. That this Guglielmo is the same person as the heir of Aloysia and of Simon Fimetta is confirmed from the fact that he bequeaths the *Casale Burfide* (Bulfide),²³ to his wife Clara de Rocka. It transpires from this will that his uncle is Andreas *Comes insularum Malte et Gaudisii*, to whom he bequeaths his bay horse. The title of Count of Malta would normally have been passed on from Nicoloso to his first-born son, Perino, the father of Guglielmo. Perino, however, was already dead in 1281 when Nicoloso was still alive so that Perino never inherited the title.²⁴ Andreas, Guglielmo’s uncle, would have been Perino’s younger brother who must have inherited the title

20. *Ibid.*, Doc. 20.

21. *Ibid.*, Doc. 26.

22. *Ibid.*, Doc. 40.

23. Bulfida is known to have been granted by Frederick II to a certain notary Alberto de Catania in August 1233 (Sciascia 1994, Doc. 7); the connexion between the De Catania and the Fimetta families is not clear.

24. Sciascia 1994, Doc. 24.

sometime between 1281 and 1290. It is known that on 16 June 1290 Charles of Anjou confirmed to the noble Andriolo *Comes Malte* and to his heirs in perpetuity the county of Malta and other property in Sicily, including very interestingly, *domum Guillelmi Crassi quam habuit in Messana que fundicus dicebatur*. If the point need be further laboured, the document continues *que omnia ex collationibus et confirmationibus domini Henrici Sexti Imperatoris Romanorum* etc.²⁵ Andreas, being the grandson of Arrigo Piscator, therefore, had every right to inherit the *funduq* in Messina, originally granted to Guglielmo Grasso and to his heirs in perpetuity.²⁶

In the immediate aftermath of the Sicilian Vespers, the insurrection of Sicily against the French, and the staking by Aragon of a claim to Sicily, it was not very clear as to the direction in which the favourable political winds were blowing. Thus Andreas, who in 1290 appears to have retained his father's allegiance to Anjou and was able to retain his title, soon discovered that it was more advantageous to back the opposite side and by late October 1292 it was King Jaime of Aragon who had recognized his title as Count of Malta, making him contribute towards the maintenance of the *Castrum Maris*.²⁷ This, naturally, brought about a punitive reaction from Charles of Anjou who, on 22 April 1300, stripped him of the title and invested his faithful admiral Rogerio de Lauria with it.²⁸ This state of affairs continued practically throughout the whole of the following century with Counts of Malta being appointed simultaneously and independently by Aragon and by Anjou.²⁹

To return to the De Malta, in his will of 1299, Guglielmo mentions an only daughter named Lukina who was then still unmarried. By 1323 she had married Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada,³⁰ by whom she had two sons, Guglielmo Raimondo (named after his father) and Pericone, as well as a daughter, Clara (named after Lukina's mother). Another document dated 23 November 1338 reveals that this Clara had by then married a certain Ferrarono de Abela (or Abella, Abegla) who is encountered receiving the dowry promised him by Pericone and his wife's parents.³¹ On 4 February 1344 Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, close to death, makes a donation of the fief called Lu Murgu, which he must have acquired through his wife's dowry, to his elder son Guglielmo Raimondo.³² On 12 April 1347 Donna Luckina, now a widow, makes a donation to her other son, Pericone, including, interestingly enough,

25. Laurenza, Doc. LXV.

26. *Vide* A.T. Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta', in: Luttrell 1975, p. 44, n. 240.

27. A. De Stefano and F. Giunta, *Codice Diplomatico dei Re Aragonesi di Sicilia (1291-1292)*, vol. ii, Palermo 1956, 309 Doc. CCCIX, 317-8 Doc. CCCXVIII.

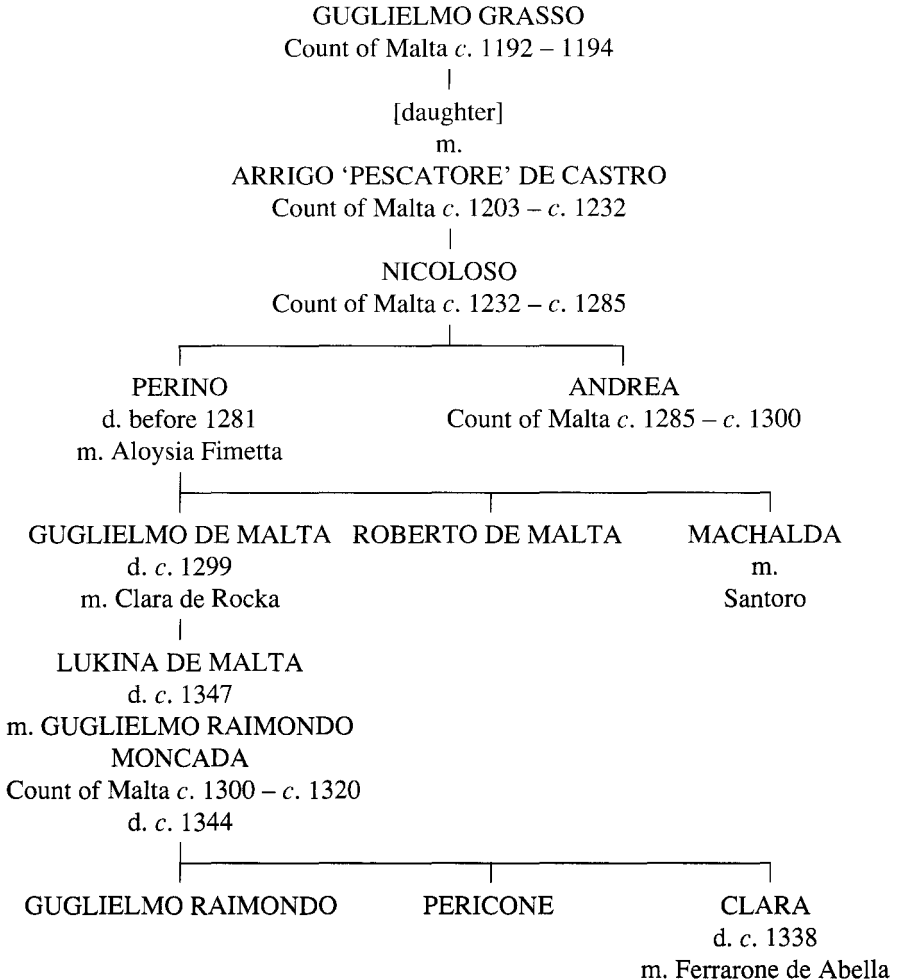
28. Laurenza, Doc. LXVI.

29. *Vide* Postscript, *infra*.

30. Sciascia 1994, Doc. 68 (18 July [1323]).

31. *Ibid.*, Doc. 111.

32. *Ibid.*, Doc. 117.



the fiefs of Bulfida and Scordia Soprana and much else besides. It is important to note that these other lands in Sicily had been acquired in exchange for the County of Malta as is described in the same donation:

*... quas [terras] dicta donatrix una cum dicto quondam magnifico viro suo habuit a Serenissimo Principe quondam bone memorie domino rege Frederico olim Sicilie rege ex quadam permutacione olim innita, facta, habita et tractata inter dictum regem Fredericum de dictis unciis auri centum viginti [per universitatem terre Calatagironi racione antique assise et baiulacionis] et dictam magnificam donatricem per comitatum insularum Meliveti et Gaudisii olim suo cum omnibus villis, terris ... cum quibus ipsa donatrix et antecessores sui hactenus bona donata predicta tenuerunt.*³³

This exchange must have occurred sometime before 1323, as on 18 July of that year, King Pedro II orders the payment by the *vice-secreto* of Caltagirone of the hundred and twenty *uncie* on the *cabella antiqua assise baiulacionis*, referred to, to Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada and to his wife Luckina.³⁴

Postscript

Having re-acquired Malta, the Aragonese Frederick III, King of Sicily, granted the islands to his younger son Guglielmo, who by 1330, had ceded them to his half-brother Alfonso Federigo d' Aragona.³⁵ On the latter's death in 1338, Malta was inherited by his first-born son Pedro Federigo d' Aragona who was Lord of Salona in Greece where he resided until his death in 1355.³⁶ On 7 October 1350 the islands were reintegrated within the Royal demanium but, within a decade, were alienated again to Guido de Ventimiglia (in 1360).³⁷ Between 1375 and 1377 Frederick IV's natural son Guglielmo d' Aragona was Count of Malta.³⁸ Following the death of Frederick IV on 27 July 1377, his son's claim appears to have lapsed as King Pedro IV of Aragon is encountered reasserting his rights over the islands and conferring the County on his kinsman Lluís Federigo d' Aragona, Lord of Salona.³⁹ This title he held till his death sometime before

33. *Ibid.*, Doc. 119.

34. *Ibid.*, Doc. 68.

33. *Ibid.*, Doc. 119.

34. *Ibid.*, Doc. 68.

35. Transcripts of deed of concession and of confirmation by Frederick III (dated 20.xi.1330) in: A. Rubió i Lluç, *Diplomatari de l'Orient Català: 1301-1409*, (Barcellona 1947) 482-5, Doc. CCCXCIII (i.ix.1380).

36. Rubió i Lluç, p. 228, n; p. 253, Doc. CXCIV (14.iii.1350), n. 6; pp. 680-1, n. 2; and pp. 298-9, Doc. CCXXIII (Messina, 7.xii.1355): *Nobilis quondam Alfonsus Fridericii... dum hujus vite commodis fungeretur, de terris, castris et bonis suis pheudalibus disponens, nobilem quondam Petrum primogenitum suum, heredem instituerit in eisdem.*

37. Fiorini, Doc. 4 (29.xii.1360).

38. *Ibid.*, Docs. 146 (4.ix.1375), 160 (17.iv.1376).

39. Rubió i Lluç, Doc. CCCXCIII, *cit.*

October 1382.⁴⁰ Manfredi Chiaromonte's will of 1390 provided his daughter Elisabetta with the County of Malta but Martin Duke of Montblanch, having re-established his hold on Sicily, sought to procure local support by granting out these islands to various magnates, starting with Giovanna d'Aragona in 1391.⁴¹ A year later, Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada was offered the Marquisate of Malta and Gozo, which he turned down and which was granted, in turn, as a County to Artale and Beatrice Alagona in 1393. Following their rebellion soon afterwards, the Marquisate was re-confirmed to Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada in 1396, which he now lost due to his rebellion against the King during which he also lost his life.⁴² The islands were reintegrated within the demanium in November 1397.⁴³

Parallel to this sequence of Aragonese appointments runs another independent one made by Anjou. The Angevins, whose claims to Sicily and the Maltese islands were never abandoned, made their own appointments to the title of Count of Malta. In April 1300, Charles of Anjou invested Ruggiero Lauria with the title, once Ruggiero had switched allegiances. He held it till his death in January 1305 when the claim passed to his son Rogerò, who died young.⁴⁴ In the second half of the century the title was being conferred on the Acciaiuoli, a Florentine family of bankers. Thus, Niccolò Acciaiuoli was *Comes Malte* in 1375,⁴⁵ and his son Angelo is mentioned as carrying the title between 1358 and 1373.⁴⁶ The title was still being used by the family in 1391.⁴⁷

40. *Ibid.*, Doc. DXXV (23.x.1382).

41. Luttrell 1975, 46-7.

42. Texts in Fiorini, Docs. 173 (4.iv.1392), 178 (i.vi.1393), 184 (1.viii.1393), 186 (15.ii.1396), 205, 208, 219, 222, 223 (15-26.ii.1398).

43. Original parchment in National Library of Malta, Univ. 3, Doc. 8 (27.xi.1397).

44. Luttrell 1975, 44.

45. *Ibid.*, 45.

46. ASP RC 3, ff. 79^v (1358); RC 4, f. 246 (1372). Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Reg. Aven. 142, ff. 517, 521 (1360); Reg. Vat. 245, f. 109 (1363); Reg. Vat. 268, ff. 292^v-3 (1372); Reg. Vat. 269, f. 19 (1373).

47. Luttrell 1975, 44.