

# **The Gozitan Milieu During the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Times**

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**G**iliberto Abbate's quantification of hearths in these islands shows that around the year 1241 the Gozitan population was about one-fifth that of Malta (Luttrell). It is also stated that of the total of 366 hearths only 203 were Christian; the rest were in their majority Muslim (155 hearths) and a few (8 hearths) were Jewish. The suppression of Islam in the Kingdom of Sicily at the hands of Frederick II between the date of this census and 1250, the year of his death, did not have the same devastating consequences for the Arabic speaking population on these islands as it had in Sicily, where the pockets of resistance, confined to such inaccessible strongholds as Castro Yanni, felt they could stand their ground, but were soon worn out and snuffed, and all opposition literally annihilated.

It appears that the Saracens on these islands, probably because in a much weaker position due to the smallness of the place, reading the writing on the wall, opted wisely for a more accommodating stance and were consequently, in their majority, spared exile or worse. This must account for the survival of the language and of the Semitic anthroponyms here to this day, reflecting ethnic continuity with the Islamic period, in sharp contrast with the extinction of the same in Sicily. In the rapid process of Latinization and re-Christianization that followed, the various communities in the Maltese islands merged to form an increasingly homogeneous unit.

## **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MALTA AND GOZO**

Throughout the later Middle Ages, Gozo shared with Malta a constant aspiration for permanent annexation to the royal *demanium*, frustratingly interrupted by a succession of alienations by insensitive monarchs to

foreign counts and magnates, starting with the first recorded cession to Margarito di Brindisi in around 1193, down to that most permanent of all – to the Order of St John in 1530.

Gozo also shared with Malta a form of local government which, after Frederick IV's intervention in 1372, crystallized into the *Universitates* on very similar lines to those obtaining in the demanial towns of Sicily. The Gozo *Universitas* was altogether distinct from its Maltese counterpart like which it was headed by a *Capitaneus Virgae* or *Hakem*, four *Jurats* and various other dependent officials. The *Hakem* had his own court, called the *Curia Capitanale*, presided over by himself, with its own judges and notary.

The Jewish section of the community, totalling some 175 in 1492 the year of their banishment, was accountable to him. He was responsible for the keeping of public peace, an office which came under a *Capitaneus Armorum* for both islands, when one was appointed. The day-to-day administration of the council was in the hands of the *jurats*. At this point, extrapolating from the Maltese situation, one is tempted to make assertions about the court presided over by the *jurats*, defence arrangements and other similar all-important matters, but such assertions would no longer be based on the sure ground of documentary evidence. Whereas for Malta the historiographer is supported by a plethora of some quite unique archival material, especially for the post 1450-period, in writing about Gozo he is very severely hampered by a near-total lack of this kind of essential support. This is due mainly to the devastating vicissitudes of 1551. Nothing, as far as is known, prior to that tragic date, has survived on Gozo itself so that one has to make do with the little that can be gleaned from Maltese archives and some other archives abroad, especially those in Palermo.

From this surviving documentation it is clear that the Gozo *Universitas* was quite independent from that at Mdina as is evident from a number of observations. Starting from 1432, one encounters at the Palermo archives a number of *Capitoli* which the Gozitans presented to the monarch quite independently of others subscribed by Mdina (Giambruno and Genuardi). Indeed, the problems and grievances dealt with were quite distinct, if at times similar to those discussed by the Maltese *Universitas*. Certain matters, such as defence, naturally concerned both,



A sally port on the northern medieval enceinte of the Citadel, built during the Aragonese rule (1282-1530). *Photo by courtesy of Gaulitana*

so that in 1418, for example, there was a single request to levy a wine-tax to collect funds for the building of a defensive tower on Comino and, a decade later, both *Universitates* closed ranks to present one solid front against the tyrant Monroy whom they ousted from these islands. In other matters, however, each council charted its own course of action, while collaborating on issues of common interest. Thus, different consuls in foreign cities, such as at Licata, were appointed to represent their different interests. Distinct deals were struck by the two councils for the importation of free wheat from Sicily and a number of restrictions on the exportation of beasts of burden between the two islands were in force during the fifteenth century. That the jurisdictions of the different courts were quite distinct and did not overlap is evident from a number of notarial deeds concerning trade agreements with Gozitans in which explicit clauses were stipulated to ensure Maltese rights in recovering debts in Gozo in spite of the *beneficium fori Gaudisii*. Faced with a threatening presence of Moorish corsairs the two *Universitates* exchanged information regularly and efficiently as appears from the *Mandati* documents. Although no local money dating from the Medieval

period has ever turned up, the documentation of the period is full of references to both *pecunia usualis Melite* and to *pecunia Gaudisii* (AAF *Registrum...* f.53, 21.ix.1440; f.65, 28.ix.1506) and this is not to be taken merely as money of account as the odd reference like *uncias auri novem et unum augustale usualis Melite* clearly establishes.

## INCURSIONS AND VILLAGE SETTLEMENTS

The tower on Comino referred to had to wait two full centuries before it became a reality during which time less-fortified Gozo continued to bear the brunt of severe *razzias* by Muslims and Christians alike which left the island in a perpetually debilitated state. Thus in 1274, the Genoese depopulated the island in retaliation for Angevin reprisals. The Moorish invasion of 1429 that is reputed to have carried away with it some 3,000 men, took its toll also on Gozo. Calabrian corsairs wrought havoc in 1439 and, a century later, the arrival of the Order actually exacerbated the situation by drawing the attention of their sworn enemy, the Turk abetted by the Barbary corsairs, to these islands; harrying incursions escalated and culminated in the catastrophe of 1551. The tense atmosphere that must have prevailed among the population is evidenced by, for example, the various pleas to the monarch registered in the various *Capitoli*. This fear of the lurking danger on the coast must account for the total lack of villages and other settlements in the Gozo *campagna*, so that the threatened population contracted itself tightly around the hub in the Citadel and its Rabat. In turn, this accounts for the total absence of *raħ al* place-names on Gozo in contrast to the well-understood pattern of Maltese rural development into a rural centre, usually with a non-*raħ al* name descriptive of the topography and associated with a parish church, surrounded by dependent smaller settlements with *raħ al* names associated, generally, with a person. The contracted form *Hal* for *raħ al*, essentially a sixteenth-century phenomenon, is likewise completely absent from Gozo as the thaw did not show any signs of happening before the following century.

It is for this reason that the older Gozo parishes are all to be found in the Citadel and its Rabat. Of these four can be listed, namely the *Matrice* in the *Castello*, and St George, St James and *Santa Marija ta' Savina* in the Rabat. It has been argued in the past that the term *Matrice*, datable to

the fifteenth century, is indicative of the fact that other parishes, including the aforementioned, had been dismembered from it. To my mind this is a bad case of “reading one’s history backwards”, giving a seventeenth – or even an eighteenth – century interpretation to events that happened two or more centuries earlier. The term *Matrice* is used for other churches in Malta including fifteenth-century references to the Żebbug and the Birmiftuh parish churches, from which no other parishes are known to have been dismembered before 1500. Another reference that has recently come to light perhaps gives the correct interpretation of the term in the fifteenth-century context; it concerns the parish church of Naxxar from which no parishes were dismembered pre-1500, certainly neither Mosta nor Gharghur. In 1486 a certain parishioner called Leu Hebeyr requests permission to build anew “*quamdam basilicam sive ecclesiam sub titulo gloriose virginis Marie de Nativitate conjunctam cum ecclesia maiori sive matrici dicti casalis Naxar*” (NAV, Notary Zabbara, R494/1).<sup>\*</sup> It is clear that the term “matrix” is used here in opposition to the smaller chapel abutting onto the major structure. It is well known that the Gozo church of the Virgin in the Citadel was precisely of this form in the Middle Ages, as the more notable families vied with each other to construct, embellish and endow family chapels with burial rights abutting onto the major church. It is being suggested here that the term “matrix” was used precisely in this sense of a mother church as if suckling her offspring chapels, clinging to her sides.

## **SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND RELIGIOUS LIFE**

These chapels constitute evidence of a vigorous upper crust and wealthy section of Gozitan society, who could afford to build and richly endow chapels for their own use especially with exclusive burial rights. These include the Navarra, Pontremoli, Castelletta, Mompalau and De Nasis families, comparable to, but quite distinct from, their Maltese counterpart, the Desguanes, De Guevara, Vaccaro, Gatto, Santa Sophia and the rest. In at least one case – the Castelletti – it is known that the family had been exiled to Gozo from Sicily for some crime and they eventually settled here permanently. One should mention here that these islands were a favourite place of exile for Sicilians, especially, noble families. Thus, for

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<sup>\*</sup> Translation "A certain chapel dedicated to the Virgin, annexed to the major or matrix church of the same village of Naxxar".

example, in 1485 alone, out of a total of 153 cases of *pene non detentive* in Sicily no less than 40 were deportations to Malta and of the 22 cases relating to *nobili*, 8 were exiled to these islands. It is of interest, albeit only marginally so, to remark *à propos* of Gozitan versus Maltese aristocracy, that in all documentation concerning marriage writs, testamentary inventories and other relevant deeds down to the mid sixteenth century one never comes across the mention of chairs in the Maltese context; this is in quite sharp contrast with the Sicilian situation. There is, however, just one outstanding exception and this comes from Gozo in the will of Pinus de Pellegrino dated 1423 (NAV, *Notary Zabbara*, MS. 1132).

Apart from these *nobili* there were other well-to-do families of lesser standing, who endowed their churches in a less grand way but who also established important foundations. One must mention at least two hospitals, one of which was founded in Rabat by Franciscus Bonnici in 1454, further to a pre-existing one already known in a document of 1426. Many of these people bequeathed much of their land to the Church in order to establish *animagii* to ensure that Masses and other prayers be said for their souls and those of their relatives. A typically Gozitan practice appears to have been the *cucia juxta usum Gaudisii* whereby bread and other foodstuffs used to be distributed among the poor at the expense of the deceased *pro remissione suorum peccatorum*.

The religious disposition of the people can also be gauged by the large number of churches founded and endowed. Although the circumstances in which the Augustinian friars came to be established in Gozo between 1415 and 1450 are not known, the way the Franciscans came to own a friary in Gozo is now pretty clear. It was ‘the municipal Government and the people of Gozo, spurred by no small devotion’ who in 1492 built of their own accord and means the Oratory of St Francis at Rabat (Aquilina and Fiorini 1994) The meagre fifteenth-century documentation that survives cannot hide the existence of no less than some 50 churches on Gozo in that century dedicated to Saints Agatha, Andreas, Antonius, Bartholomeus, Catherina, Cecilia, Dominica, Erasmus, Georgius, Jacobus, Joannes, Leo, Lucia, Michael, Nicolaus, Pancratius, Paulus, Philippus, Sophia, Theodorus and to most titles of the Blessed Virgin.

The vigorous religious life is also attested to by other activities such as

the organization of confraternities – two or three are encountered in the fifteenth century, namely an unnamed one in 1441, that of the Annunciation in 1452, and that of St Antoninus in 1510 – the establishing of *maritagii* or endowments for destitute girls of marriageable age, and charitable foundations further to the hospitals and *qućcija* already mentioned, including the *Pane di Sant'Antonio*, and various *convivia* for the poor usually associated with certain feasts of saints (AAF *Registrum*). One must not omit to mention also the financial support given by Gozitans to the *Sacra Crociata*, as in 1533, and the participation in processions to established shrines for the gaining of indulgences such as on the occasion of Jubilee years. Thus, in 1450, a document from the Vatican Secret Archives reveals the names of no less than five shrines in Gozo where these indulgences could be earned; these were *Beata Maria infra* (taken to refer to Santa Maria Savina), St James, St George, St Augustine and St Peter in *Cimiterio*.

### THE GOZITAN CLERGY

The Church of Gozo also had its own problems not least among which was the high incidence of concubinate clergy. In passing judgement over events after the lapse of half a millenium, one is not merely and unfairly scrutinizing them using twentieth-century criteria and standards of morality totally oblivious of conditions then prevailing. There is ample evidence, and this from Gozo itself, that lay people of the time would have been happier had their clergy led a more chaste way of life. Several testamentary bequests exist, where the testator wanted Masses to be said for his or her soul by priests who were expressly expected to be non-concubinate (AAF *Registrum*).

With regards to the occupations of the Gozitan clergy, one can state that further to their pastoral work proper, not a few were engaged in agricultural and pastoral work like the rest of the population on the island, a situation that has persisted even to recent times. A few cases are documented in which priests kept themselves busy with perhaps more appropriate occupations. Reference is made to the production of liturgical texts in all stages of the process. The records of the Mdina Cathedral show that the skills of Gozitan priests were sought in the production of parchment, the copying of the texts and the binding of the books; among

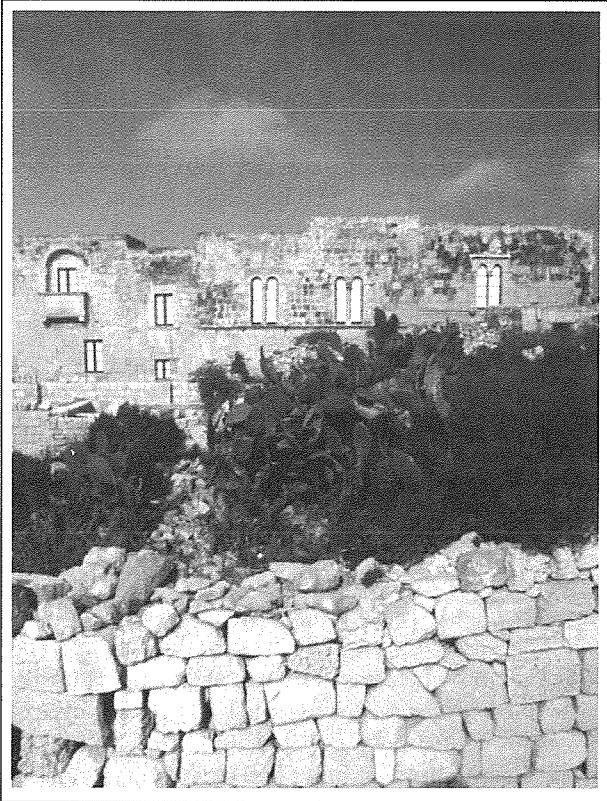
the more prominent names that occur in the 1460s and 70s is that of Don Pinu Saliba.

On a lighter note, a scrap of evidence from the same decades shows Gozo in a different light. In December 1466, the second wedding of Donna Lisa de Vagnolo was celebrated in Gozo to the strains of a viol, a lute, trumpets, drums and much dancing and singing; the lute-player was Salvu de Luchia. It is also clear that at about the same time, the habit of serenading in the streets was not unknown either in Gozo. The cleric Andreotta de Bisconis used to walk the streets in the company of other youths singing and reciting madrigals at a high voice.

### THE ARRIVAL OF THE ORDER OF ST JOHN

With the arrival of the Order of St John in 1530, the rhythm of life in these islands changed, initially, for the worse. As has been pointed out, the attacks by Moslem raiders were stepped up, with Gozo often bearing the brunt. As far as the internal administration of the islands is concerned, the Order soon took control of all that mattered, so that the *Universitates* became increasingly emasculated. Several Maltese families found conditions under the Order so unbearable during this early period, that they opted for self-exile. Of the Gozitan families that were worst hit in this respect was the Platamone family that had numbered several prominent members of the community. A knight was soon appointed Governor for Gozo – Fra Salvator de Sin is encountered in 1537 – and by 1551 the office of *Hakem* was dispensed with (Fiorini 1993a). On the other hand, not much was done in the way of defence so that when the crunch came in 1551, the Citadel, that was supposed to protect the entire population of some 8,000, was being protected by the efforts of a single bombardier – an Englishman who was soon silenced. The devastation that followed was numbing. The entire population, save for a few hundred who bravely scaled the walls at night, was dragged into exile in distant Constantinople. Although the resilience of the survivors was felt soon after the tragedy, and the Order steeled itself against further attacks by reinforcing the stronghold, and in spite of massive immigration both from Malta and from Sicily, the process of regaining its original strength was slow, so that it took Gozo about a century for its demographic profile to achieve pre-1551 levels (Fiorini 1986).





Three impressive houses in the Citadel (from about 1500) built under Catalan influence on the style diffused by the Chiaramonte family when they were counts of Malta. *Photo by courtesy of Gaulitana*

## CONCLUSION

One can take a look at Gozo twenty five years after the tragedy and view it as the Apostolic Visitor Dusina saw it in 1575. In spite of the fact that this report permits only a restricted view from a purely ecclesiastical stand-point, it is sufficiently comprehensive as to afford a good insight into and be fairly representative of the general situation. Of the four parishes, St James was *penitus diruta a Turcis* and ta' Savina, although only *partim diruta*, lacked all parishioners as the Turks had destroyed all their habitations; its parish priest Don Andreas de Federico had fled to

Sicily and was still absent 25 years later. St George was only partly functional so that, for example, the Holy Eucharist and oils had to be removed to the relative safety of the *Matrice* for fear of the enemy. The parish priest of the *Matrice*, the only fully functioning parish, did not have a proper habitation and was living in an annexe to the sacristy. The parish priests of the two functioning parishes declare that between them they had a mere 900 parishioners of whom 800 belonged to the *Matrice*. The 100 in St George came from 40 to 50 households, yielding a very low mean size of between 2 and 2.5 per family unit. Don Lorenzo de Apapis, *Vicarius Foraneus* and parish priest of St George gratuitously asserts “*Qui non ce mastro di schola*” although in the *Matrice* there was a *magister scholarum pro docendis diaconis*.

The number of priests to serve the community was very low – six in all – but signs of a reawakening can be read in the presence of another four *clerici* preparing for the priesthood, doubtlessly under the direction of the *magister scholarum* referred to. The large number of benefices with associated burthens of Masses and other services was shared among the handful of priests and two others from Malta; Don Leonardus Dallo, for example, was beneficiary of no less than 10 *animagii*.

The physical ravages of the Turkish invasion were still very tangible; several churches were described as *penitus dirute* and had to be prophaned whereas others had their *porte lignee a Turcis ablate*. A *hospitale Sancti Juliani* is mentioned in the *Castrum* but it had been turned into a prison by the *Vicarius Foraneus*. The people were poor and could ill afford to maintain their clergy. Parish priest de Apapis declares that when his parish had seen better times the parishioners used to pay for the oil and candles but that now he had to pay for them himself; he, furthermore, rechannelled his sacramental dues to the restoration of his church, which was in very bad shape (AAF *Visitatio*).

This generally depressed situation clouded by a constant fear of impending disasters persisted for at least another twenty five years. It was only towards the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the wake of heavy investment in coastal fortifications by the Order, typified in Gozo by the building of Garzes tower and that on Comino, that a new era of prosperity and security began to dawn on the island.

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