

Gio Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis

Linguist and Historian

1712-1770

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There were many a person throughout history who went out of their way to promote Gozo, the island that had borne them. However few, if any, loved Gozo and the Gozitans, its language and history, as much as Giovanni Agius, better known as De Soldanis.

Early Life

Gio Pietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis, his full name, was the son of Andrea Agius and Valenzia Sultana. Like many contemporary scholars in the eighteenth century, he latinized the family name to De Soldanis to highlight his erudition.

He was born in Rabat, Gozo, on 31 October 1712, and was baptized in the parish church of St George Martyr, the following morning. As a young boy, he must have received private tuition at the hands of some priest, most probably a Capuchin friar, who lived in the Convent of Our Lady of Graces, on the outskirts of Rabat. He had a soft spot for the Capuchins and one of his best friends was the capuchin Fra Luigi Bartolo, a designer and cartographer who later provided him with a unique map of Gozo and Comino. This rare treasure was stolen from the National Library of Malta in 1997.

His early tutors directed him to further his studies at the Jesuit College in Valletta, Malta, where he majored in Literature, Theology, and Law. His above-normal intelligence was brought to the attention of Fra Paolo Alpheran de Bussan, Bishop of Malta and Gozo, who on 29 October 1729, at the age of seventeen, appointed him

canon of the Gozo Matrice thus providing him with a regular salary to further his studies. He was ordained priest around 1735. In 1753, he was chosen by the Universitas, the administrative body of Gozo, as the *quaresimalista*, the official preacher of the Advent and Lenten sermons at the Matrice, then considered a very privileged choice. His delivery made him a legend in his own time.

He was fortunate to befriend the bishop's brother, Fra Paolo Alpheran de Busan, a frequent visitor to Gozo and a benefactor of the Island., who soon became his protector. Through his influence, he travelled abroad, followed courses in *utrisque iuris* at the University of Padua, and became member of several important institutions: the *Accademia degli Apatisti* in Florence, the *Accademia Botanica* of Cortona, the *Accademia di Buongusto* and the *Accademia degli Erranti*, both of Palermo. During his years in Italy (1750, 1752, 1757), he befriended a number of well-known authors of his time to the extent that he is mentioned in some of their writings and referred to as a scholar.

Linguistic Achievements

De Soldanis nurtured two intellectual interests, one linguistic and the other historical. He is still a source of information in both fields, though this does not mean that he is a flawless linguist, nor an error-free historian.

His most famous work in the linguistic field is the *Damma tal- Klieh Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin*

(1750), a four-volume manuscript at the National Library of Malta. This collection of Carthaginian words in the spoken language of Maltese and Gozitans was and remains the main source to Maltese lexicographers. The *Damma*, unlike the later dictionaries of the Maltese linguists M.A. Vassalli and A.E. Caruana, includes also a number of Romance loan-words and a number of archaic and obsolete words and usages. The words are listed in alphabetical order: the first volume is Maltese-Italian-Latin, the second and third Italian-Latin-Maltese, and the fourth Latin-Italian-Maltese. The explanation thereof is generally prolix, but its phraseologically is richer than Vassalli's. The work shows De Soldanis as a multi-faceted lexicographer who was so deeply interested in the language that he identifies it with the people.

De Soldanis wrote also a grammar of the Maltese language: *Nuova Scuola di Grammatica per agevolmente apprendere la Lingua Punica-Maltese*, published in Rome in 1750. In this book, he attempts to prove that Maltese is of Phoenician origin, a linguistic myth that took some time to die out.

Both amusing and instructive is another manuscript *Degli abiti, costumi, sponsali, matrimoni, e funerali de' Maltesi*. This consists of racy dialogues covering social aspect of eighteenth century life in Malta. Topics deal with clothes, engagements, marriage, funerals, the cultivation of cotton, and so on.

Perhaps when judged by the scholarly standards prevailing in his time, especially in Germany, his linguistic scholarship was not above reproach. On the other hand, no scholar had written so extensively and in-depth about the Maltese language before him.

Father of Gozo Historiography

The language and history of a people form a sort of ethnic unit. De Soldanis transition from Maltese lexicography to Maltese history and, in a narrower sense, to Gozitan history, was a natural process. This scholar wanted to know all there was to know about the language and history of the people of Malta and Gozo.

His special interest in the history of his island home must have been nurtured in him by his tutors. He soon began



KAN. GIAN PIET
AGIUS DE SOLDANIS
1712 - 1770

collecting every source of information that referred to Gozo in Greek and Roman classical writings as well as in medieval and contemporary works. He consulted the best books known at that time, collected thousands of documents from archives in Malta and abroad, and had a good knowledge of all that was happening around him. He meant to write about all aspects of history, whether ancient or modern, sacred or profane.

He began putting together this jigsaw puzzle of several thousand pieces of information in a manuscript written in Italian that he entitled: *Studio Preparatorio per l'opera Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano*. This preparatory work was partly written by himself and partly by an assistant who copied for him citations or whole documents in their appropriate place. Still thirty five years

old, he began writing the second draft *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano* preserved at the National Library of Malta. A copy of this draft, made by Mikelang Garrone, the first librarian of the Public Library of Gozo, is preserved at the National Archives, Gozo. The work is dedicated to Fra Paolo Alpheran de Bussan, Bishop of Malta and Gozo (1728-1757).

He humbly called his work an *operetta*, a work of no significant depth, but, as a matter of fact, he did his best to collect all material available and give his views about it. The Gozo manuscript runs to 950 folios. Parts of this manuscript were translated into Maltese by the Gozitan librarian, Monsignor Guzeppi Farrugia Gioioso and published by the Government in two volumes in 1936 and 1953. It is indeed a pity that his name does not appear on the title-page of this print. A facsimile edition of these two volumes was published in July 1999. In the same month, an English translation of the same volumes by Reverend Anthony Mercieca also saw the light of day.

The importance of this manuscript can never be emphasized enough. Previously, the history of Gozo had been treated very superficially. The father of Maltese historiography, Gio Francesco Abela, has only a handful of references to Gozo. This work is rendered very important because of the thousands of references that he includes in the margins. These references, whether to printed or archivist sources, are so precise that more than two hundred years later, I myself still refer to them to trace unpublished material. De Soldanis wrote in order to be of greater service to his people, both spiritually and materially, as he himself affirmed. He wrote quite a number of books on the most varied subjects. One example suffices: *Discors Apologétique Contre la Dissertation Historique et Critique sur le Naufrage de St. Paul dans la Mer Adriatique* publié par M. L'Abbé Ladvocat, *Bibliothécaire de Sorbonne* (1757), a treatise

in defence of Malta as the place where St Paul was shipwrecked.

Later Life

In 1758, when he settled in Gozo after his trips abroad, he struggled hard to obtain an important post in his small island. He would have liked to be chosen as a Minister of the Inquisition Tribunal on his island. But he never obtained that post because no vacancies existed for the office he desired.

In 1763, he did get an important post, but not on his island home. On 14 June, he was appointed as the first librarian of the Bibliotheca Publica in Valletta by its founder, the Knight Bailiff Fra Luigi Tencin Guerin. This was to grow into the National Library of Malta.

De Soldanis soon began to put into order the heritage of Tencin. In the last two years of his life, he suffered a lot from ill-health. He died at the age of 58 on 30 January 1770. He was buried at Saint Paul Collegiate Church in Valletta.

This is nothing but a brief outline of one of the most eminent Gozitan scholars who left us a linguistic and historical heritage, with some dead wood maybe, but with a core of linguistic and historical information that contemporary scholars continue to find useful.

Select Bibliography

AGIUS DE SOLDANIS Gian Pietro Francesco, *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano* (1745) : National Archives Gozo, Misc. 243.

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"Every idea, so long as it is profound and original, every work or art, so long as it is beautiful, every moral effort, so long as it is sincere and creative, every search for truth, beauty and justice, creates culture."

P. Struve