

Antonino Saliba

the first cartographer, astronomer, and astrologist (sixteenth century)

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One of the most prominent and, unbelievably, least known Gozitans of past times is Antonino Saliba, who describes himself as a *Maltese del Gozo*. His date of birth and death are unknown, but he was active in the second half of the sixteenth century.

Life and works

Gian Piet Francesco Agius de Soldanis (1712-1774), the first Gozitan historian, concluded his well-known history of Gozo *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano* with a chapter entitled *Raggualio degli uomini illustri Gozitani in santità e dottrina* (details of illustrious Gozitans in sanctity and doctrine). The second in his list is Saliba. De Soldanis offers very little information about him, but recently, the late Maurice Agius-Vadala carried out an in-depth study of this eminent Gozitan, thus making him better known.

Saliba prides himself as a *Maltese del Gozo* in a treatise on Cosmology first published in Naples in 1582. The affirmation of his Maltese nationality is done in the dedication to his patron, Prince Marc'Antonio Colonna (1535-1584), Viceroy of Sicily, commander-in-chief of the Papal fleet at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and one of the heroes in the victory that followed. He was proud of his origins repeating the above affirmation in other editions of the same work.

Another piece of information about him, found in the same work, is that in 1572 he was appointed

commessario delle decime. This necessitated frequent visits to the southern provinces of Italy, where he travelled to collect tithes due to *Malta nostra patria*. He does not specify whether he was a *commessario* on behalf of the Sovereign Military Order of the Knights of Saint John, the Bishop's Curia, or the local Universitas.

It is also known that he had a doctorate in Philosophy and Theology as well as a *doctor utriusque iuris*, a doctorate in both canon and civil law, though all this does not necessarily mean he had Holy Orders. It certainly means however that he had received tertiary education abroad. He was also a *Magnifico*, a title bestowed upon those holding high offices in society.

De Soldanis praises him as a great mathematician: *Mathematicarum vero adeo excellens, ut parentem dixeris, non alumnum* - he excelled so much in mathematics, that he was not its scholar, but its master. He also had a book of Saliba in his collection entitled *Nova accurantissimaque elementorum distinctio* printed by the well-known publishers Toullan of Paris, dedicated to Theodoricus Wolfgang, Archbishop-Prince of Salzburg, another of his patrons. Probably, this was a treatise related both to astronomy and astrology. More precisely it must have been a treatise of *astrologia giudiziaría*, a science that pretends to study the influence transmitted by stars, planets, and other celestial phenomena on the human being and his or her activity.

This is the conclusion that is evinced from a sonnet by Datio Serio reproduced in the 1582 publication already referred to. As Saliba included it in his publication, it means that he was in full agreement with its contents. The sonnet praises him for studying the phenomena of celestial bodies and their effect on humans:

*...le cagion, con quali
Hortuona, hor l'ampeggia, hor fiocca, hor piove:
Et come la Cometa i raggi muove
Per dare presaggio alli futuri mali.*

He is praised as being unsurpassed in the study of the phenomena of thunder (lightning), snowing, or raining, and of how the comets move their rays, to give a premonition of future ills.

He remained active throughout the grandmastership of Hughes Loubenz de Verdalle (1582-1595).

The work of 1582

The greatest achievement of Saliba is possibly the work of 1582, a treatise on *astrologia giudiziana* expounded on a single full colour sheet. It was discovered at the Herzog August Library, in the city of Wolfenbuttel, Germany, by the above-mentioned Agius-Vadala, who was even kind enough to donate a copy to the Public Library, Gozo (See Figure).

The title runs:

Nuova Figura di Tutte Le Cose che Sono E Del Continvo Si generano Dentro La Terra E supra Neli Aere Composta Per il Magnifico Antonino Saliba Maltese Dal Gozo Dottore In Filosofia Teologia Et in Legge Canonica, E Civile A Benefitto Universale Di Coloro Che Desiderano Sapere Li Occulti Segreti Della Natura Colla Sua Dichia[razione].

The sheet, 810 x 564 mm, includes a treatise in Italian some 7000 words long, and carries a coloured planisphere in the middle, 547 x 564 mm. The sheet



was prepared by the well-known Neapolitan engraver Mauro Cartoro, whose name appears on the lower right hand corner of the map.

The planisphere, a map or chart formed by a projection of a sphere on a plane, portrays a geocentric universe with concentric spheres as described by Aristotle in his books. The map also carries several small illustrations with biblical episodes related to the world beyond. A full description can be found in Agius-Vadala.

Antonino Saliba is the first Maltese ever to print something related to cartography. He was a *Maltese del Gozo*, proud of the tiny island that gave him birth, so much so that he succeeded in making its name known throughout sixteenth century Europe.

Select Bibliography

AGIUS DE SOLDANIS Gian Pietro Francesco, *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano* 1745, 894-895 : National Archives Gozo, Misc. 243.

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