

The Fortification and the Defence of Gozo down to 1551

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Abstract: *Although the sources that have come down to us for Gozo's medieval history are sparse, one can glean therefrom sufficient information on how the smaller island's defence and fortification was organized before the coming of the knights. Like Malta, Gozo had its own string of coastal watches which gave sufficient warning of impending invasions, but the walls of the citadel constituted the ultimate bulwark against the enemy. One document in particular yields some new insights into the problem of balancing personal interests against the public good involved in the maintenance of these walls. We are left in the dark as to how effective these walls were throughout the centuries before 1551, but unfortunately, very little doubt remains on the outcome of the disastrous onslaught of that year.*

Keywords: *Gozo, fortification, defence, citadel, Order of St John, prisons.*

Introduction – Sources

As a result of the Muslim onslaught on Gozo of 1551, Gozitan historiography has suffered from and been handicapped by a great dearth of sources on which historians can draw to found their conclusions on the solid ground of documentary evidence. It is asserted in Library Manuscript 373 of the National Library of Malta that all ancient records were taken away from Gozo in 1551 and carted away to Constantinople. Recent attempts by Maltese researchers in Turkey to locate this precious material have, to date, proved futile. The situation is only somewhat mitigated by four main alternative sources:

(i) The fortuitous creation in 1545 (just six years before the fateful year) of the register in the Bishop's Curia entitled *Registrum Foundationum Beneficiorum Insulae Gaudisii*. Bishop Cubelles had ordered the formation of a register of excerpts from notarial wills and other instruments that establish the provenance of the Church's property in Gozo. This volume has now appeared as Part V No. 1 of the *Documentary Sources of Maltese History* [= *DSMH*] series; it is, naturally, of prime concern for ecclesiastical matters but also sheds light on other aspects of Gozitan history.

(ii) Civil administrative records down to 1530 kept at the Palermo Chancery of which more than two centuries of records – 1259–1485, covered by close to 1,500 documents – have seen the light of day in three volumes of the same series (*DSMH*

II/1–3), and about a third of which relate to Gozo. Included in this material, is for example, a full list of all Gozitan municipal officials unknown before, even to De Soldanis.

(iii) The acts of two of the earliest surviving notaries, Giacomo Zabbara and Paulo Bonello, published in three further volumes of the series (*DSMH I/1-3*) supply much important material on life in Gozo down to 1500.

(iv) After 1530 the records of the Order of St John kept in Malta also have bearing on Gozitan affairs whereas Maltese municipal records supplement some important details.

The object of this presentation is to glean what can be gleaned from these sources about the fortification and the defence of Gozo of relevance to the siege of 1551.

The Enemy

As an integral part of the Kingdom of Sicily, the vicissitudes of the Maltese islands have been intimately linked with those of the larger sister-island, with one important proviso, namely that the Maltese archipelago was very much out on a limb and fully exposed on the frontiers of the Kingdom. Ever since the suppression of Islam from the Kingdom of Sicily, throughout the Hohenstaufen period, the Angevin interlude and the long centuries of domination by the Aragonese, these islands had borne the brunt of all attacks of the Kingdom's enemies, Muslim and Christian, and it was often Gozo, the soft under-belly, the least defended, that was marked as the surest target. Thus, the *Annali Genovesi* recount how when, as a result of the warring between Angevins and the Genoese, two ships of Genoa were seized at Malta in 1272, in retaliation, the Genoese Admiral Lanfrancus Pignatarius came south with 22 galleys, burnt the city-port of Trapani, and, before going on to attack Messina, proceeded to Malta and sacked Gozo – *properans ad Insulam Malte, circuens Gaudum depopulavit*.¹ Just two decades later in 1297, by now the Sicilian Kingdom securely within the Catalan-Aragonese common market and after the Sicilian Vespers a sworn enemy of Anjou, these islands again suffered, this time, from an internecine struggle for power: As a result of the antagonism between the brothers Jaime II King of Aragon and Frederick III King of Sicily, the Aragonese fleet under Ruggiero Lauria attacked and devastated these islands.² In less than a century, by now the Maltese Islands in the hands of the Sicilian overlord Manfredi Chiaromonte who had expansionist ambitions in the north of Africa, led an expedition against the island of Gerba in

¹ *DSMH IV/2*, doc[ument] 34.

² A.T. Luttrell, 'Approaches to Medieval Malta', in *The Making of Christian Malta*, Aldershot, 2002, II: pp. 1–70, esp. p. 44.

1388, using Malta as a base. In retaliation, a Tunisian Hafsid attack was vented against Gozo in 1389.³ This was only a foretaste of much worse to come.

Nor were these islands prey only to Muslim attacks. Christian corsairs from Calabria were constantly molesting Gozitan shipping as appears from the *Capitula* presented to the Viceroy in 1439: *Li fusti di Calabria ni annu quasi destrutti et consumati prindendu quanti barki et navili haviamu, et prindendu la nostra bestiami, tinendoni quasi obsediati perki non ponnu li nostri navili cussi prestu fari vila ki non su prisi.*⁴

Defence

It appears that, in the Middle Ages, the defence of Gozo, like that of Malta, hinged on two important elements: an early warning system of coastal watch-out posts to give sufficient advance warning for the population to get inside the walls of the acropolis and a last-ditch defence of the main fortification that was the *Castrum* or *Castello* in the middle of the island at whose feet nestled its Rabat, or suburb, comprising the entire population of Gozo. The need to keep a constant guard on the coast-line of the kingdom is first heard of in 1375 when King Frederick IV appointed Philippus de Marino to the post of organizing the coastal and city watch.⁵ Admittedly this was in connexion with Malta but there is ample evidence that Gozo too had its own system. The loss of sources alluded to earlier has, in fact, deprived us of precisely one all-important document that must have existed: Gozo's Militia List and Roster, analogous to the Maltese lists which are extant from 1417 and later. What evidence do we have, then, for Gozo's militia? A document from the Palermo Chancery of 25 October 1399,⁶ blames the negligence in Malta and Gozo of keeping a tight coastal watch for the great damage suffered in these islands from Moorish incursions; as a consequence, the King took this responsibility away from individuals who hitherto had held the office and placed it squarely in the hands of the jurats of the respective *Universitates*. Again, a document of 2 October 1400 shows how the Notary Bernardus de Theophilo began to be employed to help the Gozitan jurats every evening to draw up the list of names for the Gozitan coastal watch.⁷ As is clear from the Maltese Militia lists, horses played a vital role in the smooth running of the coastal watch or *mahrās*, as it was known. Those who could more afford it, especially the fief-holders, were bound to keep horses for use in the defence of the island. The fief-holders had

³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ S. Giambruno and L. Genuardi, *Capitoli Inediti delle Città Demaniali di Sicilia*, I, Palermo, 1918, p. 329, III, n. 1.

⁵ *DSMH* II/1, doc. 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 281.

⁷ *DSMH* II/2, doc. 2.

it stipulated in their contract how to fulfil this military obligation in direct relation to the land they were given. Thus, for Gozo, Henricus de Osa was given the land called *Ta' San Kożma* in 1368 with the obligation of providing a soldier for each 20 *uncie* of produce from the land.⁸ Salvus Cadumi of Gozo was given the land called *Il-Qanfud ta' San Marċjan* for providing an *equus armatus*, a heavily armed horseman, for each 20 *uncie* of produce in 1398.⁹ Periconus de Bernardo of Gozo was given the *Tal-Majmuna* estate in the *Ranġisija* district of Gozo under the same conditions in the same year.¹⁰ And, in the following year, Antonius de la Barba was similarly given *Ta' Hamitu*.¹¹ This was not any different from Malta where horses are also known to have been used by the *rividituri*, or overseer, for coordinating neighbouring watch-posts. In 1410 we find a complaint by the outgoing captain of Gozo, Petrus de Ari, to Queen Bianca that he had been promised, but never actually given, 20 *salme* of barley for the horses he kept for the defence and watch of the island.¹² Under the same date, the same monarch, warns the *Vice-Secretus* of Gozo that certain men who were bound to keep horses for the defence of the island were neglectful of their duty and enjoins him that he should be making an example of them: *ki vi dijati fari mustra di loru et rividiri si stannu apruntu di cavalli et di armi*.¹³

The Maltese Militia roster clearly locates the various look-out posts mainly along the northern coast of the island and, as we have shown elsewhere, these were consolidated during the time of the Knights, at times with the erection of coastal watch-towers. For lack of direct evidence for Gozo, one can infer from the Maltese situation that the medieval posts were included in the string of posts known from the Knights' period. Abela,¹⁴ in whose day there were already in existence *Torre Garzes* and *Torre della Punta di Marsalforno*, both of which would have been key positions, lists besides *Wardija ta' Ras it-Tafal*, *Wardija ta' Ġebel Bin Giorgi* (later *ta' San Ġorġ*), *Wardija ta' Mwiegel il-Bahar*, and *Wardija ta' Rdum Ferdien*; *Wardija* being the local form of *Guardia*. Not mentioned by Abela but appearing in earlier notarial documents is *Il-Wardija ta' Handaq ir-Rummien*. Another place-name with clear connotation of look-out is *Nadur* which, together with *Nadur il-Kelb*, must have been look-out positions from very early times.

The defence responsibilities of the Gozitans, like their Maltese counterparts, included also contributing certain unpaid days of work for the repair of the main

⁸ *DSMH* II/1, doc. 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 208.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, doc. 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, docs. 271-2.

¹² *DSMH* II/2, doc. 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, doc. 143.

¹⁴ Gian Francesco Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta, isola del mare siciliano, con le sue antichità ed altre notizie*, Malta, 1647, pp. 121-2.

fortifications of the island – the *Castello*. Like the Maltese, the Gozitans did not take lightly to this added burden of having to spend nights on the coast and days of unpaid work on the walls of the *castrum*. This *angara* work was viewed as a relic of the days of serfdom and was greatly resented by all. The *Capitula* presented to the Viceroy by the Gozitan jurat Cola de Algaria on 5 November 1443 make much of the Gozitans' burdens¹⁵ – *li dicti poviri angariati ali guardii di la terra et a la maramma dili mura et multi altri angarii in serviciu dila regia magestati*, echoing the Maltese protest *di liberari li popoli dila dicta terra dila angaria dili marammi quanto ancora dila angara dila guardia chamata lo maharas*.¹⁶

One asks whether the *Castello* was the only fortified position in Gozo. There is little doubt that it was in 1551 but place-name evidence may point out to other forts or look-outs, especially standing on high ground. After all Malta too had its coastal forts in the Middle Ages such as the Tower at Benwarrad Harbour that certainly existed in the fourteenth century. The village of *Il-Qala* comes to mind. The word *Cala/Qala* has two distinct meanings, one of Romance derivation, *Cala*, with the meaning of 'inlet' or 'port' or 'cove', as in *Kalafrana* and *Qaliet Ġnien il-Fieres* in Malta and *Il-Qala tax-Xlendi* or *Il-Qala tad-Dwejra* in Gozo, all coastal place-names. The second of Semitic etymology, nowadays incorrectly written *Qala* like the first, should read *Qalgha* (with an *-gh-*) and is usually associated with inland localities which must have been at one time fortified; Arabic *Qalgha* means 'a stronghold'. Thus *Il-Qalgha ta' Hal Tarxien* in Malta could not have been a cove or inlet, nor *Il-Qlejgha* near *Mtarfa* or *Qalghet il-Ghabid* near *Il-Bidnija*. The same can be said of *Il-Qala*, or better *Il-Qalgha*, of Gozo, but any fortifications there have long been forgotten and can be discounted in the 1551 narrative. *Nadur* is another Semitic place-name meaning 'a look-out post'. It does not take too much imagination to see why both *Qalgha* and *Nadur* occupied excellent vantage-points overlooking *Il-Fliegu* and the islands of Comino which, certainly later, are known to have been used by the enemy as lairs whence to pounce on unsuspecting shipping.

The War with Islam

As has been noted, within a century of the ousting of Islam from the Kingdom of Sicily, there never ceased to exist bad blood between the North and South and the East and West of the Mediterranean; whichever way you look at it, Malta and Gozo were in the thick of it. I want to emphasize that Frederick II's action was one of religious cleansing and not of ethnic cleansing. There would not have survived such a phenomenon as the Maltese language, nor would there have remained in Malta and

¹⁵ Giambruno and Genuardi, p. 334.

¹⁶ N[ational] L[ibrary] [of] M[alta], Lib[rary] MS. 670, f. 42v (1531).

Gozo people with surnames like Abdilla (Ghabid Illah, Slave of Allah), or Buhagiar, Busuttil, Butigieg, Agius, Xerri, Mintuf, and Muhammad, to mention but a few of the most obvious; incidentally, the last one mentioned was too jarring in 1500, so it was mitigated to Mamo! With the turn of the fifteenth century, things got rougher and Malta and Gozo, perched *in frontieria Infidelium Barbarorum*, as a document of 1437 aptly put it,¹⁷ bore the brunt of it all.

A document of 1405 records how the vessels that ply the waters between Malta and Gozo, the so-called *madia*, had been burnt by the Moors;¹⁸ the King takes this opportunity to insist on a single authority, his *Secretus*, giving orders at a time of crisis and all, including the captain, had to obey. It is not known what had provoked this attack but what happened in 1429 was almost certainly in retaliation for the attack on Kerkenna in September-October 1424 by Pedro, King Alfonso's brother. This expedition had departed from Malta on 10 September and returned there after the attack. The Hafsid aggression against Aragon culminated in a massive attack on 13 September 1429 on the Maltese Islands in which a horde of 18,000 men on 70 vessels under Qa'id Ridwan devastated both islands, carrying off into slavery no fewer than 3,000 islanders. A recently published document hints at the Gozitan involvement in this struggle: its captain Franciscus Platamone had valiantly combated the Moors in that invasion and was even wounded during the assault; he was compensated by the Viceroy by being made captain again for the Xth indiction, 1431–32.¹⁹ After these sad events there was a lull sealed by various truces with Tunisia, broken only by the odd incident like when the *Secretus* of Gozo, Nicolaus Poeta was taken by Moorish corsairs while returning to Gozo from Malta,²⁰ like when the Bishop of Malta himself, Maurus de Albraynio, was similarly captured. But, towards the middle of the century, the successful Ottoman attack on Constantinople which, in practice, annihilated the last vestiges of the Roman Empire in the East, fanned the Muslim ardour to push their holy war westwards. These islands immediately felt the gusts of war as an attack was unleashed on them in 1452. The writing on the wall was clearly read and practical decisions had to be taken forthwith. Captains-at-arms and *Custodes civitatis* were appointed in both islands: Guillelmus Riera was made *Capitano di Guerra* for Gozo in 1452,²¹ and faced with another Moorish attack in 1457, Andreas de Navarra was made *Capitaneus Armorum* in September of that year,²² whereas Andreas Mintoff was made *custos* of the citadel, a post that had lain

¹⁷ *DSMH* II/2, doc. 399.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 75.

¹⁹ *DSMH* II/2, doc. 292.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, doc. 484.

²¹ *Ibid.*, doc. 523.

²² *Ibid.*, doc. 583.

vacant for ten years.²³ The threat was so real that the Viceroy authorized the Gozo *Universitas* to set aside 15 *uncie* for the defence of the island, a rather rare concession.²⁴

It is entirely possible that a mere couple of names turned up among the *Capitani di Guerra* or *Capitani d'Armi* for Gozo simply because, at a time of crisis, a single captain was appointed for both islands to organize all defensive and offensive actions. This was certainly the case during the crisis in the 1480s when Andreas Tudisco was given this responsibility between 1483 and 1486 during which time the crucial cutting of the Mdina south-front ditch was effected. It appears that similar attention was given to the south-facing walls of the Gozo citadel as transpires from some notes of Judge Giacomo Zabbara who was deciding a court-case in Gozo's Civil Court in October 1486. These three sheets of paper turned up in a batch of miscellaneous material mostly from Zabbara's 'Gozitan' period.²⁵ According to these notes of witnesses' statements, during 1484-85 the southern wall of the citadel was being reinforced with the construction of an outer skin of masonry under the express instructions of Andreas Tudisco and under the hand of *Mastru Marammeri* for Gozo Franciscus Gaudixi (Gauci), who was prime witness. As a result of this construction, a window in the residence of Cataldus de Rigio (plaintiff against the Gozo *Universitas*) needed to be blocked up. De Rigio, who by the following year had managed to infiltrate the Municipal Council and become one of the four jurats, was now in just the right position to look after his personal interests and decided to bring the matter before the Municipal Council which, incidentally, we are told met in the *Loggia* of the citadel as was customary both at Mdina and in all Sicilian *municipia*. The *Mastru Marammeri* was called before the council and his advice sought as to how some form of compromise could be arrived at. Franciscu Gauci ingeniously suggested to retain the south wall construction, apparently much needed for security, and to allow De Rigio to have a new window in his house to open facing west; incidentally, this tells us that De Rigio's residence was on the corner, close to the present-day law-courts. In his rather flamboyant way, Gauci describes this solution as *salvari la crapa et li cauli*, doubtlessly translating a then-current Maltese proverb into acceptable court-language (Sicilian) – *ried isalva l-moghza u l-pastard*.²⁶ De Rigio obviously relished neither being called a *moghza* nor a *pastarda*, for he took the matter to court where the beans were spilled for our benefit. This document draws the curtains a little to the side to allow us to take a little peep at the defence situation within a human context: some

²³ Ibid., docs. 479 and 574.

²⁴ Ibid., doc. 586.

²⁵ *DSMH* I/3, doc. 212.

²⁶ N. Tommaseo and B. Bellini, *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, 8 vols., Torino, 1879, however, does give *s.v.* *capra*, an Italian proverb *salvare la capra e i cavoli*, in this sense.

new construction works on the citadel do go on; private residences extending to the outer fortifications (we'll see more of this later); conflicting interests and egotistical stances by individuals even to the point of risking security; discussions in Gozo's Municipal Council (none of this has otherwise survived for Gozo, by contrast with Malta's Univ. 11 (1450–99), Univ. 12 (1511–31), etc.; *Capitani d'Armi* taking action etc. It seems that, on this occasion, Gozo was spared and, when the crunch came, twelve Turkish vessels unleashed their aggression against Birgu instead.²⁷

Forty years later, the situation had not changed much. A recently published letter describes graphically how, in 1526, two Maltese vessels captained respectively by Petrus Abela and Petrus de Guevara were surprised by seven Moorish vessels beneath *Ta' Ċenċ*. De Guevara managed to find refuge at *Marsa Xilendi* but his manoeuvre had the unfortunate effect of blocking the entrance to Abela's vessel which was chased all round the north-west coast past *Id-Dwejra* until he was finally cut down off *Il-Qolla ta' Marsalforn*; the Moors entered *Marsalforn* unperturbed where they divided the booty, rested for the night and left early the following day, as if they owned the place. All this action was impotently observed by the Gozitan officials from the safety of the high cliffs and could only report the *fait accompli* to their Maltese counterparts in the letter mentioned.²⁸ Usually, Maltese and Gozitans were prepared to collaborate on matters of security and common defence against the enemy; there is a lot of evidence for this but this is not the place to go into details. Incidents such as this justify fully the common plea to the King by the Maltese and Gozitans, way back in 1418, to have a protective tower erected on Comino,²⁹ a plea that, alas, remained unheeded for full two centuries!

As a result of so much continuous pressure on the Gozitan population it is little wonder that no outlying hamlets or villages ever developed on Gozo! The place-name *Rahal*, contracted to *Hal* during the sixteenth century, being completely unknown here precisely for that reason. Note that the freak occurrence of *Rahal Gubur* in a document of 1372, interpreted by some as being on Gozo, is to be discounted as a misinterpretation. Everything points towards the population contracted and concentrated at the hub, with just a few *loci rustici* in the *campagna* visited during the day for work purposes. This highlights the central defensive role and importance of the citadel, the walls that protected the entire population in times of attack!

²⁷ C. Dalli, 'In Fronteria Barbarorum: Waiting for the Turks on Late Medieval Malta', in S. Fiorini (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week, 1994*, Malta, 1996, pp. 115–26.

²⁸ *DSMH* III/1, doc. 126.

²⁹ Giambruno and Genuardi, p. 383.

The Citadel

In around 1241 the Gozo *castrum* was already in existence. Giliberto Abbate records: *Et in centimulo castris Gaudisii sunt asini tres, roncinus unus et asinus unus stallonus*. The same report gives the number of Christian families on Gozo as 203, the Sarracini 155, and the Judei 8 – a total of 366, representing a population of some 2,000.³⁰

The Crown always reserved as its right to have direct hold of the *castra* of these islands ever since the Lord of these Islands, Count Arrigo Piscator, after falling out with his master in 1223 and then making it up, had the islands restored to him as a county but did not regain control over the fortified places; the situation was still the same in 1241. Also later under King Manfred in a document of 2 March 1259:³¹ *Renovamus et confirmamus Nicoloso privilegia indulta patri suo concedentes sibi insulam Malte cum ... Gaudisio et Comino ita quod custodia castrorum sit in manibus nostris*. With the Angevin take-over in 1268, Nicoloso's title was maintained but the *castra*, including *Castrum Gaudisii*, were firmly retained in the hands of the Crown. First Hugo de Brusone and then Bertrandus de Real were castellans with jurisdiction over all *castra*, but roles were differentiated in 1274 when a certain Armannus was entrusted with Gozo alone,³² whereas Matheus de Podio was left to control Malta for the King.³³

In 1273 there were no less than 150 *servientes ultramarinos* – foreign sergeants-at-arms – controlling the *castra* and protecting the islands against the Genoese,³⁴ under the captaincy of Johannes de Pontibus and Robertus Cafuro de Malta. The *Castello* appears to have survived the depopulation of 1274 and the sacking of the island of 1297, for in 1299 we encounter Guillelmus de Malta, the nephew of the overlord Andreas, son of Nicoloso, Count of Malta, drawing up his last will there: ... *eger corpore in Castro Gaudisii, recepto prius sacrosancto ministerio (sic) Corporis et Sanguinis D. N. Jhesu Christi ...*³⁵

Who lived in the citadel? The existence of the main Church of the island is hinted at in the preceding extract as also the residence of the important personage Guillelmus de Malta, apparently in his capacity of castellan. The citadel was also the seat of local municipal government, the Gozo *Universitas*, when this came to be established some 50 years later. As stated, the council met in the *Loggia* as was customary among Sicilian *municipia*. This suggests some arcaded structure, usually

³⁰ A.T. Luttrell, 'Giliberto Abbate's Report on Malta: circa 1241', in *The Making of Christian Malta*, Aldershot, 2002, IX: pp. 1-29.

³¹ *DSMH* III/1, doc. 1.

³² V. Laurenza, 'Malta nei documenti angioini del R. Archivio di Napoli', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, v, 1934, doc. XXXIX.

³³ *Ibid.*, docs. I, V, IX, XIV.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, doc. XXXI.

³⁵ H. Bresc, 'Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano', *Melita Historica*, vi/3, Malta, 1974, pp. 307-12.

close to the main gate, judging by the situation in Mdina. The presence of the council in the citadel is also confirmed in the *Capitula* of Gozo of 1443: *volendu teniri consiglu alcuni non si trovanu ala terra per li facti loru ...*³⁶ Several important people had their residence there as can be deduced from the surviving documentation. The *Regia Curia* held property there; a document of 1442 describes such a property.³⁷ This may be the same or a different house which Il Magnifico Pietro Mompalau was given by the Viceroy and which had been held by the heirs of Ambrosio Falzono, *esistente nel Castello del Gozzo*.³⁸ Of the close to 100 wills, including that of the selfsame Pietro Mompalau, drawn up over a century before 1545 in the *Registrum Foundationum*, only 25 of the testators are not described as *habitor or habitatrix terre Gaudisii*.³⁹ If this estimate is correct, then 75 per cent of the Gozitan population of some 6,000,⁴⁰ that is some 4,500, lived within the walls of the *Castello* or *Mdina*, as one document would have it. Given the size of the fortifications, which were admittedly slightly larger than the present, this would have meant a very high population density. There is mention of other churches in later documents, San Lawrenz, San Nikola (1559), San Ġwann [Battista], San Marku (1559), and Is-Salvatur, as well as one hospital (already recorded in 1442, called Santu Spirtu in 1569 and San Ġiljan later (1582). Some streets and locations appear to have had a name! *Ruga di Harit il Hamem in terra Gaudisii*;⁴¹ *Ir-Rokna* (1548), *Tal-Mux* (1577), *Tal-Kampnar*, *Harit il-Kbira* (1539), *Ghajn tal-Kastell* (1590), *Il-Logġa* (1486) referring to the Municipal Hall (as in Malta), *Bieb l-Imdina* (1585), *Is-Sur tal-Ġizzara* (1592) and *Il-Pjazza*; others, as was more usual at the time, were identified with respect to some important person living there: *Ta' QassĊikku or Qassis Ċikku* (1568) and *Ta' Sabat* (1585).⁴² The *Castello* also had its underground prison or *guva/cavea*, very popular with the Knights, whither they condemned several of their misbehaving brethren including their future Grand Master De Valette who was sent there for four months to cool down after striking a civilian in 1538.⁴³ The Order had a proper prison built there in 1548,⁴⁴ retaining the services of the *guva*.

³⁶ Giambruno and Genuardi, p. 332.

³⁷ *DSMH* II/2, doc. 468.

³⁸ Museum of the Cathedral, Mdina, ACM Misc. 28, f. 461 (4.i.1529).

³⁹ *DSMH* V/1.

⁴⁰ S. Fiorini, 'Demographic Growth and the Urbanization of the Maltese Countryside to 1798', in V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta: 1530–1798*, Malta, 1993, pp. 297–310.

⁴¹ *DSMH* V/1: p. 15 (1510).

⁴² These names were retrieved from various notarial deeds dating between 1486 and 1586.

⁴³ NLM, AOM 86, f. 73.

⁴⁴ NLM, AOM 88, f. 13v.

TABLE Prisoners in the Castello: 1535–1542				
Name	Crime	Sentence	Date	Source AOM
Fr. F. de Frenay	provoked to duel	6 months	8.iv.1535	85: 146 ^v
Fr. G. Aymler	? [not fully sane]	residence	10.ix.1535	86: 10
Fr. D. J. Exarc + Fr. L. de Crevecoeur	brawling	prison + defrocked	5.ii.1536	86: 30
Fr. D. Gonson	hit 3 lay persons	6 months	23.ii.1536	86: 31 ^v
Fr. F. Hapelin Court	wounded lay persons	6 months	13.iv.1536	86: 40
Fr. F. Centeno	brawling	6 months	6.vii.1536	86: 42
Fr. de Malet	provoked to arms	3 months	10.ix.1536	86: 44 ^v
Fr. G. Dies	hit pregnant woman	3 months	10.ix.1536	86: 44 ^v
Fr. J. de Copons	struck Fr. M. Ferrer	6 months	27.ix.1537	86: 44 ^v
Fr. La Gotta	hit Fr. L. Cortit	?	10.vii.1538	86: 71 ^v
Fr. J. Parisot [de Valette]	hit lay person	4 months <i>in cavea</i> + 2 years in Tripoli	8.viii.1538	86: 73
Fr. P. Neglia	entered Palermo nunnery by night	6 months	29.v.1539	86: 86 ^v
Fr. L. Muñoz	wounded brother	<i>in cavea</i>	22.ix.1539	86: 93 ^v
Fr. D. Gonson	punched brother in face	1 year	16.x.1539	86: 95
Fr. Vila + Fr. Florinus	hit each other with rapier	1 year each	3.xi.1539	86: 96
Fr. J. De Lagona + Fr. P. Ponteves	killed Maltese person	1 year each <i>in cavea maiori</i>	16.i.1542	86: 123 ^v
Fr. B. Vasco	slapped H. Spatafora IUD in face (at Mdina)	2 months in <i>cavea parva</i>	23.viii.1542	86: 130 ^v

The 1551 depopulation

The citadel could not have been in too strong a position in 1551. In all of the Palermo records encountered, covering two centuries, we have come up with just one instance of repairs being made to the Citadel, although there may have been other isolated cases as the 1486 court-case shows: In 1415 the vice-regents authorized an expense of six *uncie* for the purpose.⁴⁵ Little wonder that when the Order was offered these islands as a base and home, and commissioners were sent in 1524 to assess their

⁴⁵ *DSMH* II/2, DOC. 204.

suitability, the report was anything but favourable. Admittedly biased, they had only this to say of the *Gozo Castello*:

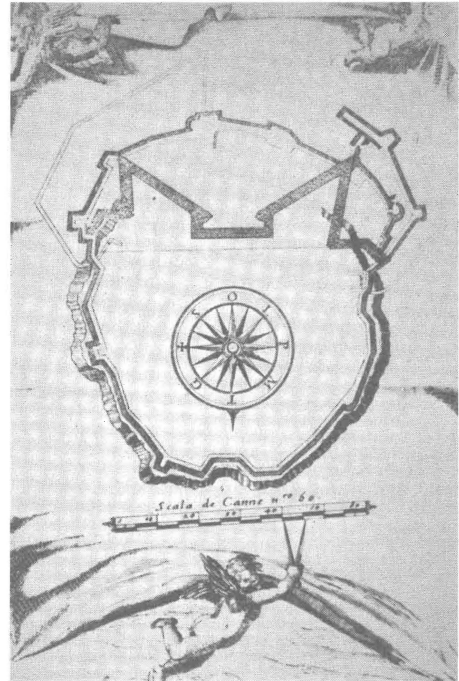
*Che la sua fortezza unica, e sola, era molto picciola, posta fra terra, di forma ritonda, e sopra un picciolo et eminente colle, o scoglio di tufa edificata: impotente et inhabile a resistere ad ogni picciola armata; dentro della quale pochissima artiglieria si trovava.*⁴⁶

Referring to D'Aleccio's sketch of 1572, the round shape of the old enceinte can be confirmed. One also notes how it was protected by six square towers, the base of the one facing north still being visible today, so that illustrations, as in Siege maps need not be entirely fanciful. This part of the medieval walling from the foundations to the parapet has clearly been preserved. What has disappeared is the building of private houses atop of the citadel walls with windows overlooking the escarpment (encountered later).

The softness of the underlying bed-rock can also be verified, yet some protection it did give: In 1411 the Sicilian rebel Bernat Cabrera took refuge there from the clutches of Queen Bianca who had the Maltese knight Franciscu Gattu ferret him out of his lair.⁴⁷ The repairs of 1415 may have been needed to make good for the damages caused by Gattu.



Stone inscription of 1579 commemorating the Spanish soldier Bernardo Dupuo who fell fighting the Turks during the razzia of 1551

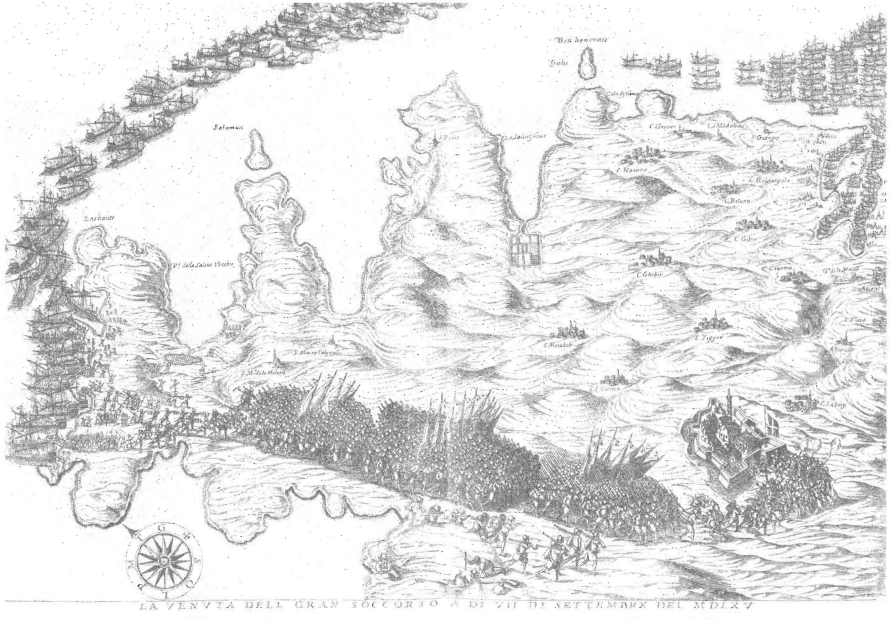


Plan of the Gran Castello c.1582, after D'Aleccio, showing a proposal for the transformation of the old castle into a gunpowder fortress. The plan gives a good idea of the layout of the medieval ramparts, showing a turreted barbican and various wall-towers.

(Courtesy: The National Library of Malta)

⁴⁶ G. Bosio, *Dell'istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, parte terza, seconda impressione, Napoli, 1684, pp. iii and 31.

⁴⁷ *DSMH II/2*: p. 145.



Siege Map: The arrival of the gran soccorso, in September 1565



The Cittadel medieval sally-port situated on the northern part of the enceinte.
(Photo: Stephen Spiteri)

Between 1530 and 1551 not much attention was given by the Knights to the Gozo fortifications. Apart from the initial pomp, pageantry, and promises made on L'Isle Adam's visit of 1530, Gozo figures in the Knights' records mainly as a place of punishment and semi-exile for straying brethren [cf. Table]. For the Knights, the citadel, like Mdina, was viewed more as a liability and they actually had plans of destroying both and forcing the population to emigrate to Sicily. This was greatly resisted by the people and, subsequently, plans had to be changed. In the case of the Gozo citadel, they were overtaken by events.⁴⁸ The Knights' attention was centred on St Angelo which they tried to make as habitable and as defensible as possible and spent precious little else on Gozo. Even in local government they meddled less than in Malta, leaving the municipal council to operate as previously and, according to De Soldanis, only imposed their governor in 1551; I have, however, noted two other governors before that, Fra Baptista Schiattese who appears to have had some trouble before 1536, and who was replaced by Fra Salvator de Sin in that year.⁴⁹

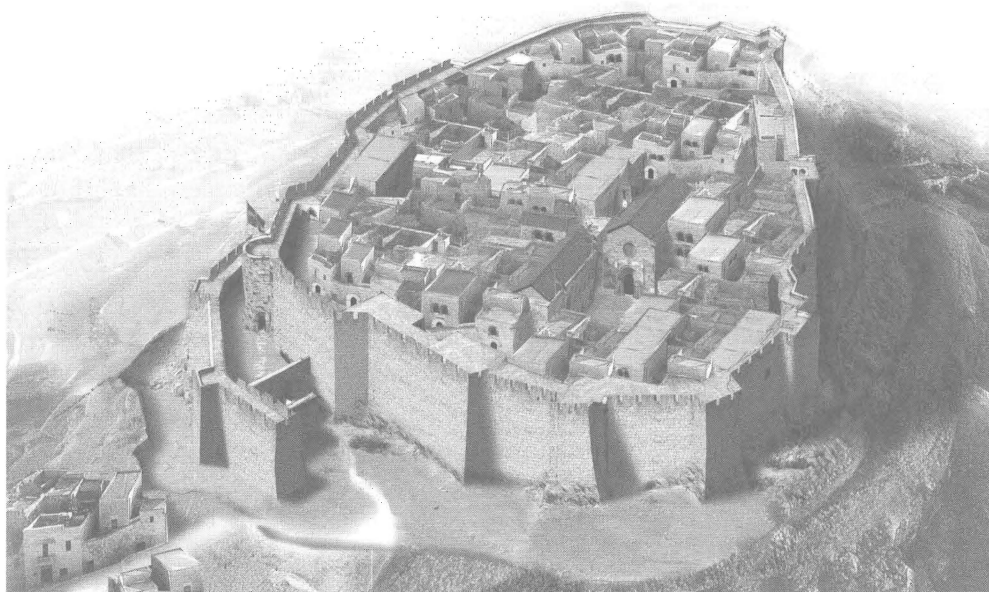
But the Muslim attention was indeed focussed on the island. Having ousted the Order from their nest at Rhodes, the Ottoman Turks and their allies the Barbary corsairs escalated their pressure on their sworn enemy to rid themselves of them once and for all from the Mediterranean. The 1551-onslaught followed by the Great Siege of 1565 can only be seen as the Crescent's bid to gain the upper hand over the Cross. Attacks on these islands, and especially on Gozo, were stepped up after 1530 so that the Order's presence here actually exacerbated the situation adding to the plight of these islands from Muslim attacks. In 1535, the Order's chronicler Giacomo Bosio recounts how ten galleots under the *Gran Corsale*, il Giudeo, went to Comino lying in wait for unsuspecting prey; Ćejlu Xuereb, returning from Syracuse copped it. In 1540, the infamous Dragut Rais with two galleys landed on Gozo one evening and managed to get away with 50 poor Gozitans who had defied orders to stay within the walls at night and for lack of proper coastal guards. In the following year, much damage was suffered by small craft plying the waters between these islands from corsairs infesting Comino, taking advantage of the absence of the Order's fleet. In 1544, Dragut again, with 10 galleys, effected another attack on Gozo during which Dragut's blood-brother was left for dead when the Gozo captain Fra Giovanni Ximenes attacked the landing party and forced them to retreat. It was perhaps out of vengeance for the loss of his brother on this occasion that Dragut was so determined on the total destruction of Gozo seven years later. In the meantime, in 1545, five other galleots of the Infidels made their appearance in the Gozo Channel but were chased away by cannon fire. In 1546, Dragut again attacked Gozo and managed to inflict heavy losses

⁴⁸ Mons. L'Abbé de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta*, 2 vols., London, 1728; facsimile edition, Malta, 1989, pp. ii and 121.

⁴⁹ NLM, AOM 86, ff. 30, 32v and f. 26v (15.i.1536).

among the farmers who were reaping corn. Restricting comments to incursions on Gozo alone, Dragut practically owned the place, coming and going as he pleased. In fact, on 15 July 1550, with the hope of gaining information on the Christian fleet, Dragut went to the Gozo Channel to reconnoitre, he stocked up with water at Gozo for his return journey and then calmly sailed back to the Barbary coast.

The 1551 attack too began as a reconnoitring exercise. They landed on Malta and moved towards Birgu and St Angelo to inspect the recently constructed fortifications. They proceeded to Mdina where they could also see the progress on the new bastions. Finally they headed for Gozo knowing full well that the Citadel was the weakest of the three and would present no difficulties. Giacomo Bosio records that they began bombarding the walls on Friday 24 July, half an hour before noon and continued incessantly and with enormous fury and noise until the following Sunday. The exertions of a single bombardier in the *Castello*, an Englishman, were soon silenced. Eye-witness accounts of the finale recount their poignant tale: '*Dicono e raccontano ancor hoggidì i vecchi Gozitani, con gran passione della rovina della patria loro ...*' how the Governor Fra Galatiano de Sesse of the Langue of Aragon, almost out of his mind, left everything to the whims of fortune, so much so that the men who could, left to themselves, scaled down with ropes from house-windows



Graphic reconstruction by Stephen C Spiteri of a general aerial view of the Gran Castello as it would have appeared around 1565, based on documentary and non-documentary sources

overlooking the sheer north wall, which was not given much attention by the besiegers, in order to save their lives. The tragedy came to its natural end on Sunday 26 July when, according to terms negotiated with the enemy by an Augustinian friar on behalf of the Gozitans, the gates of the Citadel were thrown open. The *Castello* was ransacked and, according to Vertot, demolished, as there was no one to oppose the Infidel except for one Sicilian soldier who, in a mad fury killed all the members of his family to spare them the dishonour and suffering of slavery, and then died fighting sword in hand. The rest of the population – some 700 men and between five to six thousand women and children were carted off into slavery. The Bascià spared only 40 old men but laid waste the entire island before embarking with all the artillery and his men heading towards the Barbary coast on 30 July.

The Aftermath

There is always a degree of hyperbole in descriptions of ‘devastations’, ‘depopulations’, and other catastrophic disasters. The *Gaudum depopulavit* of 1297 does not make much sense if two years later we find a description of a knight dying peacefully in the citadel comforted by the rites of Holy Mother Church. The same can be said of 1551. In three days the Moors could not have dismantled all fortifications. We can still see some of the pre-1551 walls facing North. The fortifications still offered protection in 1565 and served the very useful purpose of providing a relay-station between the besieged and Sicily during the Great Siege. Dusina’s visitation report of 1575 describes several churches in the citadel, albeit some were not in great shape, but the *Matrice* was still functioning. The same goes for the resilient population. As I have shown in my paper on the repopulation of Gozo after 1551, there was already a semblance of return to normality by 1553. Moreover, practically all pre-1551 surnames managed to resurface after the tragedy. One can also quantify the escapees and arrive at the non-negligible figure of more than 500. This figure gradually swelled with (i) the trickle of returned ransomed captives, (ii) other returning Gozitans who had fled the island before July 1551, and (iii) Maltese and Sicilian immigrants who came looking for work on the fertile agricultural land which had remained vacant. This influx was, admittedly, counterbalanced by a number of Gozitans who preferred to look for safer havens away from Gozo, particularly in newly-built Valletta and the three harbour-side cities. Overall, within a century the pre-1551 demographic profile was re-attained.