

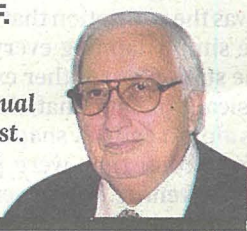
LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY

It happened in January

Malta pawned to Gonsalvo De Monroy 600 years ago

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Perhaps one of the best-known and very popular episodes of the Maltese islands' medieval history relates how the populace heroically rose against their local lord, Don Gonsalvo de Monroy (or Monroi), in 1426-27. A sizeable number of local historians have devoted ample space to this episode but all the authors were at a loss when they tried to explain why the Maltese revolted against Monroy but not against his predecessor, Don Antonio de Cardona.

The well-known recounted story ran thus: in January 1420,

King Alfonso I of Sicily (and V of Aragon), known as The Magnanimous, born in 1396 and who reigned from 1416 till 1458, was in need of funds to pursue his costly foreign policy of aggrandisement, and so he pawned the Maltese islands to Don Antonio Cardona (1395-1458) for 30,000 florins.

This was mainly correct, but the story continued on the wrong foot. It was said that Cardona turned out to be a just and moderate overlord and, as a result, was on good terms with the Maltese. The story then continued that, in 1425, Cardona sold his rights over the Maltese islands to Monroy (who died 1428) who proved to be a tyrant. After suffering for a year, the Maltese revolted and forced Monroy to leave Malta.

But is this story, as popularly recounted by many historians in the past, really true? Are

these facts substantially correct and exact?

“Very little is known about the events that occurred in Malta between 1421 and 1425, except that in 1423, the island was raided by the Moors of North Africa who devastated the countryside and carried off a large number of inhabitants into captivity”

For many historians, this period in Maltese history was very hazy and full of suppositions. Gian Francesco Abela, writing in 1647, simply speculated about how Cardona relinquished his rights over Malta but states that Monroy acquired them in 1425. Gio. Antonio Ciantar, who edited



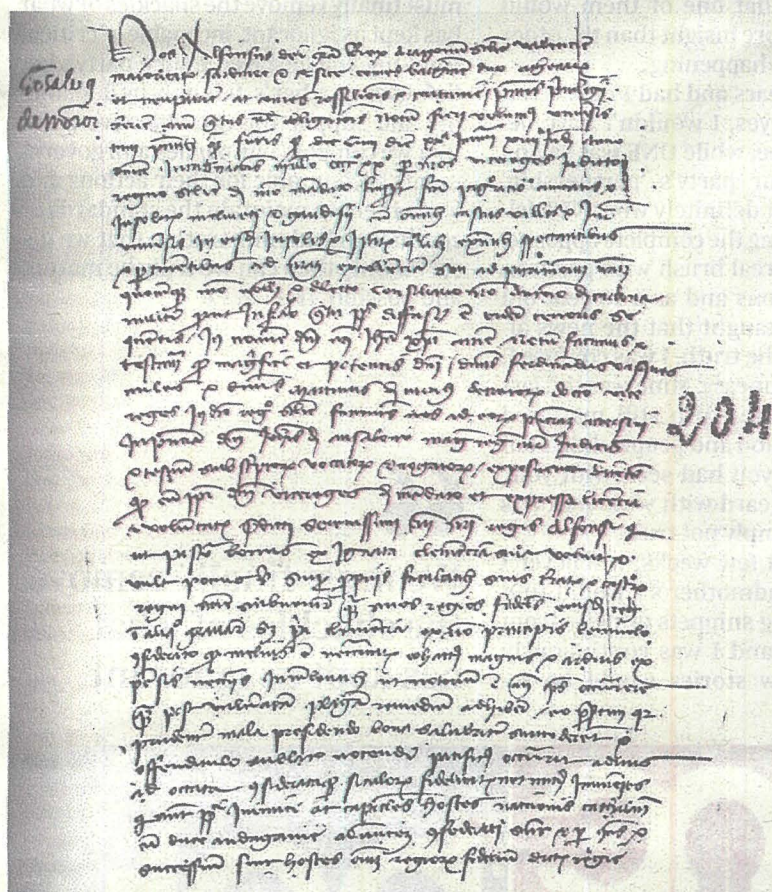
Portrait of King Alfonso V of Aragon (1386-1458) by Vicente Juan Masip (1507-79)

and continued Abela's history in 1772-1780, added nothing. In 1840, M. Miede repeated the above popular story, but Gananton Vassallo was more cautious in 1854 and decried the lack of documentation.

In 1919, Alfredo Mifsud published the known documents but was unable to explain why Cardona replaced Monroy. In 1937, Roberto Valentini suggested that Cardona returned the islands to King Alfonso, who then pawned them to Monroy. In the 1930s, in their general histories, Themistocles Zammit (in both his English and Maltese versions) and Albert V. Laferla, simply recounted the popular story.

In their school text-books, Salvatore Laspina (in 1943 and subsequent editions), Carmel G. Bonavia/Joseph M. Demanuele (in 1970) and Edwin Camilleri/Anthony Azzopardi (in 1977) simply repeated what had already been expounded. In 1974, Andrew P. Vella followed suit in the first volume of his general history. But not one of them could explain why, and how, Monroy replaced Cardona.

It was not before 1977 that an answer to these questions was finally provided. In that year, Dr (later Professor) Godfrey Wettinger (1929-2015), the well-known local historian whose meticulous research and publications opened new vistas into



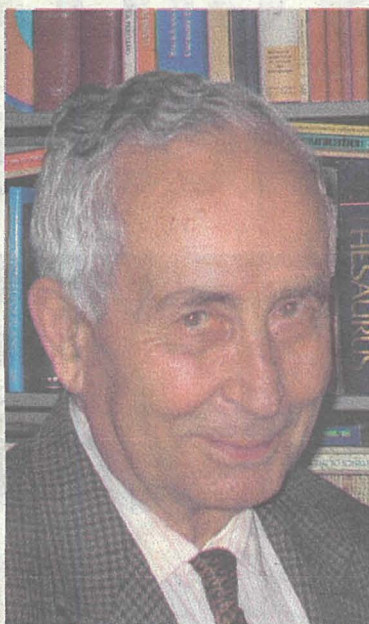
Archivio di Stato di Palermo, Protonotario del Regno, Volume 23, Folio 204 (olim 186). This is the first page of the 1421 documents discovered by Prof. Godfrey Wettinger in 1977. COURTESY: PALERMO STATE ARCHIVES, SICILY



Coat of arms of King Alfonso V of Aragon



Don Gonsalvo de Monroy. He died in 1428.



Professor Godfrey Wettinger (1929-2015), the discoverer of the 1421 documents at Palermo in 1977.

Therefore, these documents shed a completely different light on the pre-1978 hitherto-accepted accounts. Cardona did not spend five years ruling Malta and we certainly do not know whether he was the kind and just ruler he was always made out to be. It is amply clear that all those fine words about Cardona's benevolent character were no more than mere speculation by certain writers who, in reality, had no information about him whatsoever.

We do know, however, that Cardona was Alfonso's viceroy in Sicily between 1419 and 1421, at the time when the transactions took place. It is also crystal clear that Monroy lorded it over the Maltese islands for about five years before the Gozitans rebelled against him in 1425, with the revolt spreading to Malta in 1426. Again, the popular story stated that the rebellion started in 1426 and ignored what had happened in Gozo in 1425.

One has to make it clear, however, that the islands were pawned to Monroy and the arrangement was of a financial, not of a feudal nature. Neither Cardona nor Monroy were ever feudal lords in the strict sense of the word, and this transaction was completely different from previous grants of feudal rights and from the future 1530 granting of the islands by Charles V to the Order of St John who received the island as "a free and unencumbered fief". However, this technicality made little difference to the Maltese because Monroy was granted unrestricted authority without any royal interference, provided he remained loyal to the crown.

Therefore, we know exactly how Malta was pawned in January and March 600 years ago

to Don Gonsalvo de Monroy and declaring that, in the original transaction of January 20, 1421, he had actually been acting on Monroy's behalf and by his (Monroy's) express commission. One can only speculate why Cardona had represented Monroy in the first transaction because no reason whatsoever has ever been forwarded to explain this rather unusual behaviour.

The third document, dated April 12, 1421, includes a receipt dated two days earlier (i.e. April 10) showing that Monroy paid the sum of 30,000 Aragonese florins into the royal account at Palermo, as testified by the Royal Treasurer of Sicily, Nicholas de Speciali.

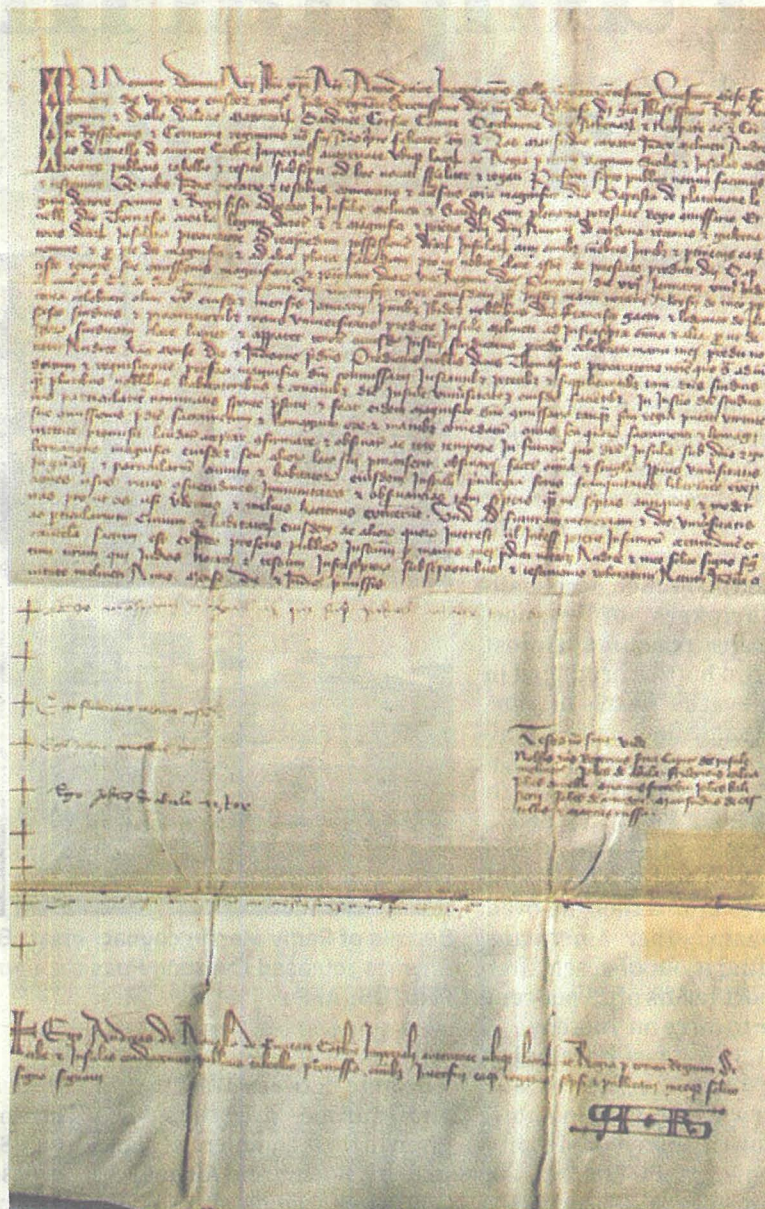
The fourth (and final) document was drawn up on May 1, 1421, and shows that Monroy obtained a further widening of his privileges over the Maltese islands in addition to those granted in the first document. Monroy was promised that the crown would not repay his loan by pawning the islands to someone else; royal visitors would uphold his (Monroy's) rights under oath if entering fortified places; the islands were excluded from the jurisdiction of Sicilian officials; his (Monroy's) authority was extended to all appeals from the decision of the local (i.e. Maltese) tribunals; lastly, if Monroy's income from the islands was insufficient, the crown would fork out all the expenses incurred for the maintenance of the fortifications.

the medieval history of Malta, was researching at the Palermo (Sicily) State Archives and came across four very important documents dealing with the relationship between Cardona and Monroy and how it affected their 'acquisition' of Malta. In 1978, Prof. Wettinger published these four documents, including their transcription, in *Melita Historica*, the official organ of The Malta Historical Society.

The first document states that Don Antonio de Cardona was being granted the lordship of the Maltese islands – including Mdina, walled towns and castles situated on the islands, fiefs, royal lands and revenues and all other rights belonging to the royal court – on January 20, 1421, in return for a loan of 30,000 florins of Aragon. Cardona had to fly the royal flag over the islands, retain his fealty to the king and fight for him at his command. It was also agreed that Cardona's lordship was transferable for an equal sum of money.

So far, the original story was substantially correct, except the dated year, 1421 instead of the formerly-quoted 1420. On February 11, 1421, Cardona's representative, Thomasio Cucuzza, confirmed to Maltese representatives, always in Cardona's name, that their rights and privileges would be upheld.

However, the second document, dated March 7, 1421, shows Cardona transferring his rights over the Maltese islands



National Library of Malta Manuscript, Univ. 3: The Maltese swear allegiance to Don Antonio Cardona on February 11, 1421. COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MALTA

but very little is known about the events that occurred in Malta between 1421 and 1425, except that in 1423, the island was raided by the Moors of North Africa who devastated the countryside and carried off a large number of inhabitants into captivity, including the Bishop of Malta, who happened to be on the island.

That the Aragonese carried out retaliatory attacks on Djerba and the Kerkenna islands made no difference to the Maltese who were severely short of provisions due to the Moorish raid. This hardship may have been one of the causes that led to the revolt but we still do not know what was the immediate cause that sparked off the uprising.

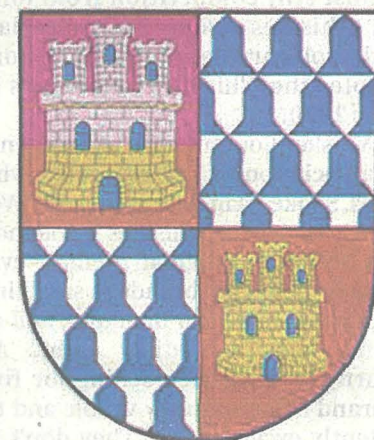
Eventually, these events led to the crown granting Malta a Charter of Liberties in June 1428, but that is another story for the future.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to professor Godfrey Wettinger (1929-2015), to whom Malta is indebted for his meticulous research and discoveries in our medieval history.



Coat of Arms of Don Antonio Cardona



Coat of Arms of Don Gonsalvo de Monroy