

A Short History of Ta' Sannat

Part Two

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I ended *Part One* of this short narrative on the history of our village with the happy event of Ta' Sannat becoming a separate parish in 1688.

A few years after this, however, on 11th January 1693 at about 2pm, a terrible earthquake hit Sicily with its epicentre in Noto, a mere 100km away from Gozo. This earthquake was so powerful, that according to contemporary sources, the sea at Xlendi receded by about a kilometre and then returned with violent force – a *tsunami*. At the same time a large chunk of land at Ta' Ċenċ fell into the sea.

The cathedral church in Rabat (Victoria) was badly damaged and had to be levelled and rebuilt; luckily no one was killed.

Time as always, kept rolling on and the population of Gozo grew steadily.

A census in 1705 revealed that the population of Ta' Sannat (including Munxar & Xlendi) totalled 385 souls out of a total Gozitan population of 6,096; by the year 1800, the population of Ta' Sannat was 850. Life in those days was still quite precarious and as late as 1708, Gozo lived under the sporadic threat of pirate attacks, however these forays gradually became quite rare.

A 1723 visitation recorded that the parish church was up and running and that it had been so for a couple of years; it was now endowed with many beautiful statues, paintings and *objects d'art* several of which are still in existence today.

There were three non-ecclesiastical buildings in the village which were of note, viz,

1. **Palazzo Ta' Ċenċ**; a manor house built during the reign of Grandmaster Perellos (1697-1720); his Coat of Arms are on one of its walls; it was known formally as *Palazzo Palina* and was used for a long time by the noble Testaferrata family.
2. **Torri ta' Ġammajr** (in Gruwa) a fortified house, so-called as it apparently belonged to an individual called *Gio. Maria (Ġammri)*.
3. **Torri tal-ħofra**-a fortified house situated near the parish church



Fig. 1 General Reynier

Momentous events were now unfolding in Europe and the Maltese islands were soon to be engulfed in the tide of events. On the 9th June 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte and the forces of the French republic invaded Malta. Gozo itself was attacked on 10th June; the French forces were led by General Reynier (fig. 1)

When the French arrived in Gozo they were confronted by 800 soldiers in the local militia, 1200 members of the *Dejma* (a civil guard) who guarded the coastline and about 300 regular soldiers (30 mounted). The Citadella and Fort Chambray were armed with a number of cannon to guard the shore line. Despite this, the island was soon overwhelmed by the professional French army and surrendered on 11th June. The Maltese islands formally fell under the control of the French Republic on 12th June 1798. Gozo, unlike Malta, was spared the wholesale plunder of its churches.



Fig. 2 General Emanuele Vitale

Both Malta and Gozo were divided into a number of municipalities by the new French authorities. The island of Gozo had two municipalities viz. *Rabat* and *Xagħra*. Ta' Sannat formed part of the municipality of *Rabat* together with Citadella, Rabat itself, Għarb and Xewkija. The Municipality of *Rabat* immediately issued directives which concerned Ta' Sannat. The village parish priest was ordered to affix the Coat of Arms of the French Republic to his church's façade (at his expense) and was ordered to purchase French flags (also at his expense) to be flown on his church on the eve of the 14 of July.

The insurrection against the French started in Malta, in Rabat and Mdina on 2nd September 1798, under the leadership of Notary (later General) Emanuele Vitale. (fig. 2) (1)

Gozo followed suite.

The Gozitan population, taking the lead from the Maltese, blockaded the Castello and Fort Chambray and on 18th September 1798 set up its own provisional government in a special congress. Canon Saverio Cassar, the archpriest of the Gozo *Matrice* was elected head of the provisional government and superintendent general of the island of Gozo. (fig. 3)

Ta' Sannat's representatives on the provisional government were Angelo Vella and Joseph Muscat. On 28th October 1798 the French Garrison in Gozo (about 217 men) surrendered to the British regular forces, who had come to the assistance of the Maltese insurgents. This day is still commemorated in Gozo as *Jum Għawdex* (Gozo Day).

Gozo, effectively became, for a while, independent from Malta and governed by Canon Saverio Cassar; it was still loyal to Naples with the flag of the *Two Sicilies* flying from its flagpoles. During the insurrection, a number of Gozitans heeded the national call to arms and joined the Maltese military companies which were being raised by the British.



Fig. 3 General Saverio Cassar

On 2nd July 1800, Canon Cassar was asked by Captain Alexander Ball to apprehend a certain Francis Buttigieg from Ta' Sannat who had deserted from one of these Maltese Companies! About 4 Gozitans in total were killed during the insurrection. The French finally capitulated to the allies on 5th September 1800. General Vitale was appointed Governor of Gozo on 21st August 1801, but he died in Rabat (Victoria) less than a year later. The Maltese islands then became part of the British Empire, by virtue of the Treaty of Paris (1815).

A Census taken in 1807 revealed that 869 souls lived in the village and this number had increased to 950 souls by 1811.

On 3rd May 1813, bubonic plague hit the islands; initially Gozo was not affected but an embargo on trade between Malta and Gozo (in an effort to limit the contagion), produced considerable hardship for the Gozitan population.

In February 1814, as the plague was dying down in Malta, it struck in Gozo and it was not brought under control until September of that year. A High Mass of thanksgiving was said in Ta' Sannat on 14th September of that year in memory of the victims. Gozo's economy suffered badly as the embargo on trade between the two islands was not lifted until 1826. This naturally affected general living conditions in Ta' Sannat.



In 1815, when the Maltese islands formally became part of the British Empire, Malta and Gozo were divided into 6 lieutenancies, of which Gozo was the 6th Lieutenancy.

The Lieutenant for Gozo was Baron Pasquale Sceberras Testaferrata, father of Major General Michele Sceberras Testaferrata (2) and of Cardinal Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferra. Another of the Baron's sons was Paolo Sceberras Testaferrata who had been given command of the Maltese *Garde Nationale* under the French in the rank of *Chef de Brigade* but who quickly changed sides when the insurrection got under way! (3)

The Lieutenant had his deputies and the deputy for Ta' Sannat was Mr. Joseph Muscat, who was also styled *Sindku* or mayor; this system lasted until 1849.

In 1813, work started on the first cemetery in the village; prior to that, burials were actually held inside the church (below the site of the main altar), but as Ta' Sannat was growing in size, this was no longer practical. This small cemetery was sited below the parvis at the (then) front of the small church. In those days the front of the church was on the opposite side of the building to where it is today and the altar faced east. The first burial, in the new cemetery, took place on 9th August 1814.

On a lighter note, the horse race is a major event at the Ta' Sannat village *fešta*. The First horse race took place in the *fešta* of Ta' Sannat on 22nd July 1810; the village *fešta*, in honour of St. Margaret, gradually became one of premier feasts of Gozo, renowned both for the religious activities inside the Church as well as for its outdoor celebrations.

Cholera hit Gozo in 1837 and the first victim in Ta' Sannat died on 14th July; this was followed by a further 23 cases of whom 10 died. Gozo was declared free of cholera in October of that year.

A census held in 1842, showed that the population of Gozo stood 14,342 of which 899 souls lived in Ta' Sannat (424 men and 475 women); this represented about 6.7% of Gozo's population. These figures displayed a drop when compared to the census of 1811, which showed a village population of 950 souls. Emigration played a part in this population drop; some locals emigrated to Marseille in France and made their fortune there; they returned to Ta' Sannat and one of the village streets is named after them (*Triq Marsilja*.)

The very first general election was held in Malta & Gozo in 1849. Due to the financial qualifications in operation at the time, the parish priest was the only person in Ta' Sannat eligible to vote.

In 1832, on the occasion of the feast of St. Margaret, the village parish church was beautifully and impressively decorated in damask for the very first time. Fireworks, another feature of the *fešta*, were first heard at the village celebrations of 1838. That year saw the first recorded presence of a band in Ta' Sannat which entertained the locals during the *fešta*. On this first occasion as well as in the following few years, however, it was a Maltese band which provided the music for the *fešta*. In 1846, a Gozitan band (under the direction of Maestro Diriano Lanzon) played for the first time ever in Ta' Sannat.

The first formal procession through the village in honour of Saint Margaret, patron saint of Ta' Sannat took place in 1850.

The first statue of St. Margaret, sculpted by Karlu Darmanin (1825-1909) arrived in the village on 7th May 1863 to be carried around the village streets in the *fešta*, much to the delight of the locals. It was carried in procession up until 1890, when it was replaced by the present statue, made by Gallard *et Fils* of Marseilles. The first procession with the new statue took place on Sunday 26th July 1891.

There was a massive lightning strike on the parish church on 20th September 1858, killing a worshipper.

A 1901 census showed 1,116 people in Ta' Sannat, with a total Gozitan population of 20,003.



Fig. 4 Mro. Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri

A brutal murder was recorded in Ta' Sannat on 9th December 1915; the motive appears to have been robbery, but the killer was never brought to justice.

Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri settled in Ta' Sannat in 1921. (4) This erudite man made a very large contribution to the village both as an educator (he was the head teacher of the local primary school, 1921-1932) and as a musician.

During his years as head teacher, he produced a number of musical compositions as well as teaching a number of musical instruments to local children. There is a monument to his memory in a small square situated in Cocco Palmieri Street. (fig. 4)

(to be concluded)

NOTE: I have, once again, relied very heavily on the excellent book (in Maltese) *Sannat Fi Grajjiet Għawdex* by Rev. Joseph Bezzina (1989), which is available for purchase at the Parish Office

- (1) For a detailed biography of General Emanuele Vitale, see my book “...of Maltese Generals and Admirals”, (Mid Sea Books, 2015)
- (2) For a detailed biography of Major General Michael Sceberras Testaferrata, a general in the army of the Kingdom of Bavaria, see “...of Maltese Generals and Admirals” (Mid Sea Books, 2015)
- (3) For details about Chef de Brigade Paolo Sceberras Testaferrata Sceberras Testaferrata, see “...of Maltese Generals and Admirals”, (Mid Sea Books, 2015).
- (4) A detailed biography of Maestro Caruana Spiteri, written by me, can be found on the band club website. An abridged version of this biography was been published in *The Gozo Observer*, issue no. 32 (Summer 2015) - University of Malta Gozo Campus.



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