

REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF HOSPITALLER GOZO

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*I*f I were asked to describe the state of our historiography today, I would not hesitate to define it as one experiencing a general crisis. Ironically, this crisis has been the result of the overwhelming quantitative progress achieved by our local archival researchers, Gozitan and Maltese, the massive accumulation (or should it be called a 'monstrous agglomeration?') of new factual knowledge about our past. The remark may sound unfair, but I think it would be unfairer still, perhaps, if the hard truths which sometimes need telling are either left untold or masked beneath a purposely vague or ambiguous language. Indeed the purpose of this brief communication is to provoke discussion, a rethink, not so much on our Hospitaller past as on the way this past has been, and is being, approached and reconstructed.

Focusing on Events and Parochialism

From a study of most of what has been written on Gozo in the recent past, and of most of what is being written at present, even by professional historians claiming specialization in particular fields, two increasingly clear ideas emerge.

The first is that too much importance, almost absolute attention, is given to the historical event. Most of our histories are histories of past events, chronicles assuming different shapes and forms, some more sophisticated than others, all focusing with varying degrees of emphasis on particular episodes, or chains of episodes, and individuals. Each is allowed to assume, singularly or collectively, the status of an end in itself, when its primary function should be, ought to be, solely a means to a deeper meaning, a step

further to a better understanding of a deeper reality. This is too unacceptably traditional, completely at odds with developments and achievements in the historical discipline. Either in their individual capacity or in their totality, events do not constitute the ultimate social reality. Their importance is only relative.

The second idea concerns what may be termed parochialism or insularism – the bane of our historiography. The Gozitan past has long been, and is still being, by and large historically approached in complete isolation from the rest of the Mediterranean world. Is it because of our geographical isolation that, in the exercise of their profession, most of our historians prefer to remain, if I am allowed the expression, ‘inamenable’ to new ideas and techniques, new methods and approaches, which historians in other countries have been for decades and decades employing to their discipline? Whatever the driving force which persistently motivates this unpardonable adherence to the traditional approach, the major flaw lies in one’s concept and understanding of the idea of history. The ultimate objective of history writing is the faithful reconstruction of social reality in the past; its essence, the permanence of change. J. H. M. Salmon, a leading British historian of France, once summed up this idea very neatly: ‘No change, no history’ (Salmon 1987: 4). It is the intimate combination of the three Braudelian levels of historical change which ultimately constitutes the totality of man, the totality of social reality (Braudel 1972: 17-22 and 1238-44; Braudel 1958: 725-53). A total history of Gozo is a *desideratum*; and so is, in this sense, that of Malta.

Histories of the Short Term

Most of our histories are histories of the short term, and most of the writers of our past are reluctant to move away from, to go beyond, the drama and spectacle of ‘great events’. Most of us, including some of our most reputed professional historians, enthuse over the reconstruction of what in the long-term context proves to be trivial and relatively insignificant. These are often urged on, perhaps instinctively, by a forceful innate desire to be the first to discover new documents, new facts, new events, new minute details, in the false belief that ‘documentary authenticity was the repository of the whole truth’. They still feel the need to allow themselves be borne along by one document after another in the hope of



The Gozo Castello from the roof of St George's Basilica. Photo: J. Farrugia.

seeing the fascinating chain of facts and events reconstituting itself, as if that was the sole and ultimate end of history writing. To them, the discovery of a name which had not been hitherto included in an endless list of similar names, is a historiographical achievement in its own right.

A classic example of the history of events is the trauma experienced by the Gozitans in 1551. Was this event of any real outstanding significance to the historical development of Gozo? Was it, in the true sense of the term, a sharp dividing line?

The criterion I would employ in defining its importance to the long-term history of Gozo is to endeavour to assess the magnitude of change which it could have possibly brought about. If the post-1551 Gozo may be justifiably termed 'a new Gozo', how much of it may be unquestionably attributed to that event? In the long-term vision of historical development, a 'new Gozo' (in the shape of a new land-settlement pattern, the rise of villages radiating from the *Castello* and their gradual development into parishes) only begins to emerge during the seventeenth century, or perhaps at the very end of the sixteenth. But, then, was not this to a considerable degree the result of an overall defence strategy that was then being adopted by the Hospitaller Government (Vittorio Cassar's tower at Mġarr, erected in 1605, appears to have been the first symptom of this change), and in part the result of developments in the wider

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Mediterranean context, including the gradual but noticeable decline of the Ottoman power?

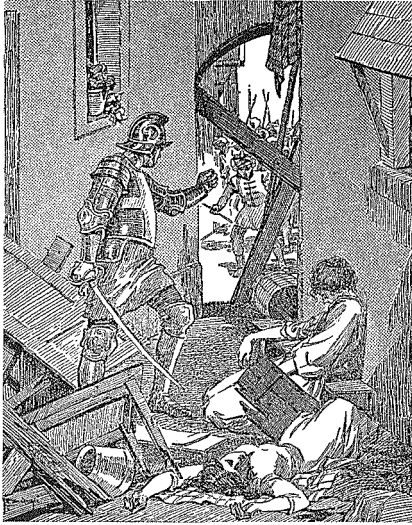
Substantial modifications to the *Castello* did not take place until almost fifty years after the event, at the turn of the century, 1599-1601, under the magistracy of Martino Garzes. A new fortress, Fort Chambray, was built as late as the eighteenth century.

To attribute the 'new Gozo' to the tragedy of 1551 is to assign to the latter episode permanent qualities which do not appear to have belonged to it. The quality of whatever life was left during the fifty years or so immediately following 1551 does not appear to have been any different from the years immediately preceding it. When a structural change did in fact occur, it was the product of other forces.

Long-Term Perspective

Such histories are inattentive to the long perspective of the underlying permanent structure. We have, for example, brilliant, fully documented histories of the beautiful churches in Gozo, with details regarding their origins and promotion to parochial status, with masterly descriptions of their building, their modifications over the years, their rich architectural styles and artistic masterpieces, with accurate lists of parish priests, and so on. We know as much of the Arabs and what they did on Gozo as scraps of documentary and archaeological remains allow. We know of the Gozitans' devotions to particular shrines and cults. The list can go on indefinitely. But then, we do not have a history of Christianity in Gozo, of religion, of culture, or indeed of civilization.

We know, or we can fairly easily know by consulting the rich archival documentation of the Hospitaller Order of St John, what each successive Grand Master – from L'Isle Adam to Hompesch – did for Gozo. We know with precision the military and architectural history of the *Castello*, Fort Chambray, and other coastal towers. We can read at leisure the technical views of the several military engineers visiting and reporting on early modern Gozo. But do we really have a total, long-term history of security and defence of the island? Was security after all a question of purely military interests, with no deep social and psychological implications?



An artist's impression of the heroic act of Bernardo de Opuo – whose story about the killing of his family, during the attack of 1551, is legendary. (Drawn by R. Caruana Dingli and reproduced from S. Laspina's popular *Outline of the Maltese History*).

How revolutionary was the military policy and strategy adopted by the Hospitallers to Gozo? Were there no stable elements, elements of continuity, behind whatever structure military innovations assumed over the centuries?

Such 'constraints' as the geophysical structure and geographical location of the island, its insular nature, the character and quality of the people, all these were, and are, determining forces which it would be wrong to ignore, even though they are hardly to be found in archival documentary sources. They are important because they are real, because they are permanent, stable ingredients of social reality, and therefore of the shape and form which change imperceptibly assumes over the ages, just as determining as innate spiritual constraints, mental frameworks, or attitudes of mind.

It is only fairly recently, for example, that one historian found it difficult to acknowledge the role played by the geophysical structure of Gozo in determining the identity of the island as distinct from that of Malta. He even went so far as to define the character and quality of the land, the force of insecurity, and the economy as 'non-historical factors'. Immobile and constraining as these elements always are, they definitely constitute

a major force of historical change. Indeed, even the influence which Sicily, for example, exerted on the culture of Gozo, at different times and in different shapes and forms, should, indeed must, be in part attributed to Gozo's geophysical character, with all that this implies – its smallness, the perennial inadequacy of food supplies; the paucity of its natural resources; the geographical proximity of the two islands; and a growing population with ever-growing aspirations. It was precisely these factors which had ultimately determined the Maltese islands' dependence – first economic, and then political – on nearby Sicily.

Acknowledging the Elements of Permanence

While acknowledging that all history is human history, most local historians fail to acknowledge these elements of permanence, of stability, of imperceptible survival in the vast domain of man's social, economic, and cultural activity. Was the Gozitan of 1800 entirely, absolutely, different from his ancestors in 1530? Although his long Hospitaller experience had structurally changed for the better his outlook in general, his style and way of life, his education and standard of living, his tools and machinery, his furniture and his clothes, and the value he attaches to leisure, certain characteristic elements and values were too deep and structural to be uprooted – his language, his religious convictions, his deep devotion to the family, his attachment to the field and boat. All these have survived to the present day. All these had been constraining qualities to his wide exposure of foreign influences, to his formative experience of foreign cultures. Archival documentation alone does not provide sufficient evidence of this phenomenon of change.

References

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