

## **SOME NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF GOZO AND ITS OLD CITY UNDER THE KNIGHTS OF ST JOHN**

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**I**f you have been to Gozo you cannot have failed to notice how different it is from Malta. Unlike Malta which has several large, sheltered harbours, Gozo is almost completely unindented. Seen from the air it looks like a tub floating on the sea, and some claimed that it got its name from its shape. The old name of Gozo was *Gaulos* which in Phoenician meant a tub. Gozo has practically no harbours, Marsalforn is more of a beach than a harbour, while Mgarr, where the ferry today puts in, is an artificial harbour built only a few years ago. Its surface is broken by several high flat hills looking into deep and wide valleys running down to the sea. It is surrounded on all sides by high almost vertical cliffs except for the south-eastern part which slopes gradually to the sea. Apart from the Capital at Rabat, there are in Gozo today 11 villages of which some like Xaghra, Nadur and Xewkija are quite large, while others like Kerċem, San Lawrenz, Ghasri and Munxar are still little more than a cluster of houses grouped around the village Church.

Most of the people of Gozo earn their living from the soil and even those who have a regular job, either with the Government or a private employer, are part-time farmers. As with most farming communities the people of Gozo are a friendly, but hardy and independent race, deeply suspicious of anything emanating from the central authorities in Malta most of whose laws and enactments they consider as incomprehensible and senseless impositions. The Gozitans' deep mistrust of anything coming from Valletta is not due solely to the usual insufferance of farmers of central controls and meddling, but is also rooted in a long tradition of neglect from the central Government.

For hundreds of years, even up to very recent times, the people of Gozo were left more or less to fend for themselves in very difficult and often

dangerous times and they have learned to look after and fend for themselves quite well. Unless one understands this historical process which conditioned their lives for so long one cannot understand and appreciate Gozo and its people.

### **The Siege of Gozo**

In the history of every nation some events are so momentous and convulsive as to leave an indelible mark on the character of the people. For the Gozitans, such an event took place in 1551. In the summer of that year, the Gozitans were overtaken by such a great calamity - a catastrophe of such proportions, that it remained impressed upon their minds in such a way as to condition their outlook and way of thinking for all time. On the 24th of July, 1551, Sinam Pasha, the Turkish Admiral and the corsair, the dreaded Dragut, after having failed to overpower Mdina, the old Capital of Malta, crossed over to Gozo with a fleet of 140 galleys, and after a siege of three days captured the Citadel, commonly known as the *Gran Castello* carrying away into slavery practically the whole population of Gozo, about 4000 inhabitants, all of whom had taken refuge in the old poorly fortified city. Only about 300 men managed to escape by scaling down the walls during the night. The newly appointed Governor of the Island, the Knight Fra. Galaziano de Sesse of the Language of Aragon, and the Archpriest of the Church of the Citadel were among the prisoners.

During the siege which lasted from Friday to the following Sunday, the only help which the Grand Master attempted to send from Malta to the besieged Gozitans was the dispatch of a small boat with gunpowder and some arquebuses. The boat, which was piloted by Paolo de Nasis, one of the *jurats* of Gozo, was intercepted and captured by one of the Turkish vessels besieging the island. Before leaving, Sinam Bassa and his men set fire to the Parish Church in the citadel, to the Public Archives and in general wrought as much havoc as he could. That is why most of the documents and records about Gozo date only from 1551. The Knights of St John had taken possession of the Maltese Islands in 1530; during the period of 21 years that followed they had done practically nothing to strengthen the defences of the old city, the only fortified place in the island, which had been left in its ruinous state.

To add insult to injury, the Grand Master, unwilling to leave Gozo practically deserted, had sent over, together with the newly appointed Governor Fra Pietro d'Olivares and the new garrison, a colony of Maltese to work the fields. The Gozitans, in time, began to filter back. Some escaped from captivity and others were ransomed by funds raised by Mgr Domenico Cubelles, the Bishop of Malta, and by funds raised by the bestowal of a plenary indulgence granted by Pope Julius III to those who contributed to the release of the Gozitan slaves.

As was natural they did not appreciate very much finding their land occupied by Maltese, and so many lawsuits ensued that the Grand Master had to send over from Malta 12 lawyers working free of charge to handle the disputes concerning the ownership of the land. The Gozitans had learnt their lesson. They realised that for the Grand Master and the Maltese they were expendable and that if they were to survive, they had to defend themselves and their interests on their own.

### **The Old City**

The old city of Gozo which was built on the foundations of the old Roman town had included the citadel and the greater part of present Rabat. It is generally believed that the four Crosses at Porta Reale, St Francis Square, Tombs Square and another which was placed in St Ursola Street, on the way to Gharb, mark the limits of the old town, with the citadel incorporated in it. Its walls extended from the citadel, to the North East through lands known as 'Il-Haġġarija', to the point where there is the first Cross just at the corner of the road to Marsalforn. At this place there was sited the main gate and as a matter of fact this place is still known as 'Ta' Putirjal', which means exactly the main gate. It then extended along where today there is Main Gate Street, through lands called 'Il-Habel ta' l-Isptar', until it reached St Francis Square, then turned through what is today Vajringa Street, to Tombs Square, where there was a second gate known as 'Bieb il-Ghajn' or 'the gate of the Fountain'; it then turned again to the north to join up with the walls of the citadel at St Ursola Street where there was the third gate known as 'Bieb il-Gharb'. It is interesting to know that the present road leading from Tombs Square to St Ursola Street, was up to some time ago known as 'Ta' Wara s-Sur' that is 'By the Bastion'. It is also known as 'Id-Dawwara'

During the Muslim period the greater part of this town had to be abandoned as the old crumbling walls could not be defended any more and the city was reduced to the area now occupied by the *Gran Castello*, the only part of the old city which could be reasonably defended against attack, as it stood on high ground. To this day the city has remained within these limits. The part which was abandoned by the Arabs was gradually reoccupied and became the suburb, the *Borgo*. The city continued to be inhabited up to the coming of the British though by that time only a few houses were still occupied and Rabat had usurped the function of the old city.

### **The Deserted Countryside**

The first thing one has to understand about Gozo is that for hundreds of years before the coming of the Knights of St John and for quite a long period after their arrival, the only inhabited place was the city. All the people were crowded within its walls. The countryside had been abandoned. This process had probably began towards the end of the Muslim domination. The continuous raids by pirates and corsairs had made the countryside totally unsafe to live in. The people worked the fields around the town during the day and retired to the safety of the walls during the night.

We have no trace or record of the existence of any village in Gozo before the closing years of the seventeenth century. Indeed the first two parishes outside the walls apart from the parish of St George, in the *Borgo*, were only set up in 1679. One at Xewkija with 630 inhabitants and the other at Għarb with 517 inhabitants. The siting of these two first villages to be recognised as independent parishes is indicative of the precarious state of affairs. Għarb is in the west, the most secure part of the island as it is guarded by unscalable cliffs, while Xewkija though being on the east of the island, that part from where danger was most likely to be expected, was quite near to St Martin's Tower, better known as Garzes Tower, which was built by funds left by Grand Master Martino Garzes at Mgarr, on high ground near Żewwieqa in 1605, to protect the harbour and the *Fliegū*. This tower was more than a coastal tower being built in the shape of a small castle rather than of a tower, with its own Chapel and tavern. It was large enough to offer shelter to the people,

mostly fishermen, who had began to settle around the two small chapels of St John Baptist and St Bartholomew at Xewkija.

It took almost another ten years for four other parishes to be set up. In 1687 Sannat with 370 inhabitants, Nadur with 493 inhabitants, Żebbug with 367 inhabitants and Casal di Sant'Antonio tal-Caccia or ix-Xaghri tal-Herrenia, today better known as Xaghra, with 565 inhabitants were all dismembered from the *Matrice* at the Citadel and set up as new and independent parishes. In other words in 1687 there were living in the countryside 2945 people, less than half the population of Gozo, as we know that at the same time in the city and the *Borgo* of Rabat there were living 2991 people.

### Continuous Raids

The reluctance of the people of Gozo to venture into the countryside was more than justified. The siege of 1551 was not an isolated incident. Turkish raids had been going on for a long time before this date and continued down to the middle of the 17th century. Quite big raids are recorded as having taken place in 1560 when a lot of people were carried away as slaves; in 1561 Dragut himself landed on Gozo and was only put to flight after a fierce skirmish with the Gozitan Cavalry; in 1583 Rabat was sacked and almost completely destroyed; in 1598, 40 galleys under the command of Bassa Cicala appeared off Gozo without landing men, and again in 1645, nine galleys of Biserta were sighted. Not only was it dangerous to live in the country, but also to spend the night in the *Borgo*. Because of this ever present danger the Franciscan Friars who had their convent in the *Borgo* in 1606 were given a small plot of land in the citadel near St Martin's Cavalier to build a place where they could sleep at night as they were afraid to remain in the *Borgo* during the night.

This building in the shape of a large store is still standing. Even those who had a house in the *Borgo* tried to acquire a small pied-a-terre in the citadel in order to have a place where to sleep in safety. The danger at night could be gauged from the fact that there was a law requiring all women and children on the island to sleep in the citadel which was only repealed in 1637.

## *Gozo and its Old City under the Knights of St John*

### *Coastal Towers*

The gradual spreading out into the country which took place in the 17th century kept pace with the gradual strengthening of the defences of Gozo. As already stated in 1605 Garzes Tower was built at Mgarr. In 1669-70 the *Universita'* of Gozo built the Tower at Dahlet Qorrot in Nadur, which came to be known as 'La Torre Nuova', and in 1689 built the three towers at Dwejra, Xlendi and Mgarr ix-Xini. Finally in 1720 the Tower of Marsalforn was built with funds from the 'Grand Master Alosio de Wignacourt foundation'. This replaced an older smaller tower.

Furthermore eleven guard posts were also built. These were small observation posts scattered along the coasts placed on high ground and at vantage points each of which was manned by three guards who kept watch through the night. These guard posts were placed at: 'Fandeno' (near Dahlet Qorrot); 'Santa Maria' (Marsalforn); 'Tal-Bacrat'; 'Il-Colla l-Bajda' at Xwejni, 'Ras el Vecca'; 'Wied el Ghasri'; 'Salvatur' at Dwejra; 'San Simeone'; 'Ras el Hops'; 'El Tmagen'; and 'Ras el Tafal'.

Later on some of these posts were converted into coastal batteries such as the one at Santa Maria and Qolla s-Safra at Marsalforn. Three batteries and a redoubt were built both at Marsalforn and at Ramla and a small fort at Ras il-Qala, at the tip of Qala facing Comino. These fortifications together with St Mary's tower, on Comino, built by Victor Cassar, son of Girolomo Cassar, completed the defensive system of Gozo. Later on in 1756 Fort Chambray was built. The idea behind the design of this fort was to provide Gozo with another fortified city but it never materialised as no one bought land to build houses in it.

As can be seen the process of resettling in the countryside was a slow and laborious one. The people of Gozo did not forget 1551 quickly and clung tenaciously to the safety of their city. This is the reason why the history of Gozo is really the history of its city. When people talked of Gozo it was the *oppidum gaulos* they really meant. This is also probably the reason why the city of Gozo never acquired a name of its own which is rather strange considering that even small villages have a name of their own. In Gozo the city was Gozo.



## Government of Gozo

During the 400 years between the definite conquest of Malta from the Arabs by King Roger the Norman in 1120 and the ceding of our islands to the Order of St John by the Emperor Charles V in 1530, the Government of the island of Gozo was in the hands of an official appointed by the King of Sicily called the *Capitano della Verga* or *Capitano d'Armi* aided by a body called the *Universita'* formed of four *jurats*. When the Order took over, the Grand Master Villiers de l'Isle Adam wanted to abolish the office of the *Capitano della Verga* and appoint in his stead a Governor who had to be a Knight. The Gozitans resisted this move as they claimed that by an old privilege granted to them by the King of Sicily the *Capitano della Verga'* had to be chosen from among the members of the local noble families. The Grand Master gave way and for some time this office was retained.

In 1551 the Order imposed its will and the office of *Capitano della Verga* was abolished and replaced by that of a Governor who had to be a Knight of the Order. The last *Capitano della Verga* was the Noble and Magnifi-

## *Gozo and its Old City under the Knights of St John*

cent Andrea Castelletta. The Knight Fra. Galaziano de Sesse of the Language of Aragon was appointed the first Governor of Gozo. He is remembered not only as the first Governor of Gozo but also as the man who had the misfortune to preside over the great catastrophe of 1551.

The old *Universita'* of Gozo seemed to have carried on very much as before. This was probably due to the fact that the Order could not make its presence sufficiently felt on the island because it was represented by only two officials, the Governor and the Deputy Governor, both of whom had to be Knights of the Order, all other officials were locals. The functions of the Governor and his deputy were strictly military. He was the head of the armed forces on the island and in charge of the fortifications. The civil administration was in the hands of the *Universita'*. The Governor, for example, was expressly forbidden from committing people to prison without the written order of the civil judge.

### *Governor's Court*

Although the Court of Gozo was called the Governor's Court, the Governor had only the right to attend at its sittings as a sort of honoured guest. It was presided over by a civil judge salaried by the Order who was more often than not a Gozitan, who heard all civil and criminal cases. The Court of Gozo was a Court of first instance with the same jurisdiction as that of the *Corte della Castellania* at Notabile and Valletta and from its judgements an appeal lay to the Court of Appeal in Malta known as the *Supremo Magistrato di Giustizia*. It had the Fiscal Advocate who was the state attorney and prosecuted in all criminal trials. The Court had its own Registrar who was a Notary, clerks and other officials. The Governor only presided in trials where the accused was a member of the garrison and even in this case although he was the judge he had to be assisted and take the advice of the civil judge or of a lawyer.

## **Garrison of the Island**

The Governor was at the head of all the armed forces on the island which numbered over one thousand men and were collectively known as the Militia. The armed forces in Gozo were made of three formations:



*The Cavalry.* This comprised 60 mounted men divided into three squadrons under the command of the Deputy-Governor. It had its own standard-bearer (*alfiere*), its *bandolieri*, *turcopali* and *trumpeteers*. The cavalry had a very important function as it sallied forth to attack and try to throw back into the sea or to destroy any enemy force which might land.

*The Infantry.* The infantry, known also as *Il Reggimento Antico* comprised: the coast guards armed with long-barrelled guns who manned the coastal towers and guard-posts, who numbered 392; the garrison of the citadel which consisted of a sergeant, four capurals and nine guards; and a squadron of thirty musketeers to be used as a reserve force. The infantry was under the command of the First *Jurat*.

*The Muschetteers.* In 1648 a new regiment of muschetteers was formed by Grand Master Lascaris numbering 460 armed men divided into four squadrons. This regiment which also did guard duty in the towers and guard posts was probably also under the command of one of the *jurats* as the weekly roll-call of both this regiment and of the infantry was one of the duties of the *jurats*. The infantry assembled for the roll call in front of the *Banca Giuratale* at It-Tokk while the muschetteers assembled at St Francis Square.

## Military Regulations

All males between the ages of 16 and 65 were subject to military service and had to enrol within 8 days of attaining 16 years either in one of the regiments or in the coast guard. They had to provide their weapons and their own horse if they joined the cavalry. In case of any enemy landing, a mortar was fired from the citadel and all men had to assemble at the Main Square called to this day It-Tokk.

All coast guards had to be at their post by the time the second 'Ave Maria' had sounded and were to remain on duty till morning. If any enemy vessel was sighted, one of the guards was to ride as quickly as possible to the citadel to report to the Governor. The Governor would then order the firing of as many mortar shots as vessels sighted. The signal would be received at St Mary's Tower on Comino and relayed to St Agata's Tower (the Red Tower) at Mellieha, from there it was relayed to Mdina and from Mdina to Valetta.

## *Gozo and its Old City under the Knights of St John*

So that within about a quarter of an hour the Grand Master in Valletta would know of any hostile vessels approaching our shores. In the evening a curfew was imposed. After the firing of the signal call '*il tocco*' from the walls of the citadel, at the second '*Ave Maria*' all shops had to close and anyone found going about without a pass would be arrested.

This briefly was the military setup on the island of Gozo by the time the rule of the Military Order of St John was drawing to a close.

### **Civil Administration**

As already stated the civil administration of the island remained broadly in the hands of the *Universita'* of Gozo. Before going any further it would be better to explain what was the *Universita'* and how it came about. The *Universita'* was a city government which evolved in Italy in the middle ages. Such city governments resulted from the struggle between the cities and the Emperor, who was their nominal ruler, for a greater say in the running of their own affairs. This system of local government was also introduced in our islands, although it is not certain when this took place. We had the *Univerista'* of Malta with its seat in Mdina and the *Universita'* of Gozo. They were two governing bodies independent of each other, though they usually acted together when they had some petition to make to the Emperor and later on to the King of Sicily.

The *Universita'* passed laws which were known as *Bandi*, administered public funds, fixed prices of foodstuffs, especially the price of corn which was called the *meta*, checked all weights and measurers used by vendors and traders, took care of and administered public buildings and property, and looked after the sanitary requirements of the community. But above all the most important function of the *Universita'* was that of operating the *Annona*.

The *Universita'* was responsible for the food supplies needed for the island most of which, especially corn, were imported from Sicily. A system was evolved whereby the *Universita'* borrowed money from the population to have a large capital at its disposal. With this capital the *Universita'* bought foodstuffs, especially corn, from abroad when the prices were low, and stored them in its own stores. When supplies were scarce and prices high,

the *Universita'* sold food to the people at relatively low prices. This operation was called the *Annona*. The *Universita'* also used this capital to lend money to the farmers to enable them to buy seeds and other necessities and to pay debts.

In Gozo the *Universita'* borrowed money at 4 percent though in the early stages the rate of interest was as high as 8.4 percent. Part of the capital borrowed it used to buy corn from Sicily, the rest it lent to the farmers who repaid the *Universita'* in kind by selling to it their crops. In June on the feast of St John the Baptist, the *Universita'* fixed the prices at which it was to buy the crops from the farmers, this was called the *meta*. In November on the feast of St Martin, the *Universita'* fixed the prices at which the crops were to be sold in the shops and also by the *Universita'* itself. This was called the *contra-meta*.

### The *Universita'* of Gozo

The *Universita'* of Gozo had its seat at the *Banca Giuratale*, which was always in the *Borgo*. It looks as if the *jurats* wanted to stay and have their seat in the *Borgo* to emphasise their independence of the Governor who resided in the citadel. The *Banca Giuratale* is still standing at It-Tokk. It was built in 1733 under the Governorship of Fra Paolo Antonio de Viguier during the reign of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena and had replaced a much older building which had become too small and patched up. It is probable that originally the old *Banca Giuratale* was situated in some other place because of the prohibition of putting up any building in front of the glacis of the citadel.

The *Universita'* was not only in charge of all the civil administration, but was also involved, though under the overall control of the Governor, in the defence of the island. At first it was responsible for all expenses involved in the defence of the island and as shown it built most of the coastal towers. Later on, a sort of arrangement was arrived at with the Order, whereby the Order would pay the salaries of the troops and any capital expenditure involved in building new fortifications and the *Universita'* would be responsible for the maintenance of the fortifications and contributed for part of the salaries of some of the military officials.

## **Taxes**

To carry out its commitments, the *Universita'* needed funds and it was for this reason allowed to impose taxes. We know of several taxes which were imposed at one time or another on the people of Gozo. Most of these taxes were gathered by the *Universita'*. In 1572 after calling a *Consiglio Popolare* in the *Matrice*, the *Universita'* imposed a tax of *un grano per ogni cartuccio di vino e due piccoli per ogni misura d'oglio*. There was at one time a tax imposed on the sale of bread called *il bollo del pane*, a tax on wine and victuals sold and on the export of all animals to Malta. The Governor used to levy a tax on all bullocks used for ploughing which was called *Vardia* as the revenue derived from it went to pay the salaries of the guards.

Another ingenious method used by the *Universita'* to raise funds was the system known as the *Lanteria* or *Ceppuna*. This was a sort of animal prison. A field was set apart and rented every year to the highest bidder. Any animal found straying about could be taken to the *Ceppuna*, as it was called, and the owner had to pay a fine to the person who rented the field to get it out.

## **The Jurats**

The *Universita'* was composed of four *jurats* who held office for one year though they could be reappointed again for any number of years. During their term of office they held the rank of Captain of the Militia and enjoyed all the privileges which went with such rank. As the *Universita'* passed laws and regulations, it had the right to see that these laws were respected and enforced. It therefore had a Court called the *Corte Giuratale* which sat at the *Banca Giuratale* and was presided by the *jurats* in which cases involving violations of its laws and regulations were heard. This Court could impose fines not exceeding 15 *tari*. Because of this judicial function, the *jurats* while in office were also considered as judges and had the right to wear judges robes consisting of the silk toga and biretta.

The *jurats* were expected to attend daily at the *Banca* for the dispatch of their normal duties. They had to make regular inspections of the stores and granaries in their charge and to be present when the corn and other

crops were brought in by the farmers and to check the quality and amount of crops brought in and to issue receipts to the farmers. Once a week they had to take the roll call of the two foot regiments and to visit the hospital for males which was built outside the walls of the citadel in present St Francis Square. Every three months they had to inspect the coastal towers belonging to the *Universita'* and see that everything was in a good state of repair. In June of every year they had to inspect and check all the wells and cisterns which were found in the citadel to see that they were kept clean and full with fresh water brought from the *Gran Fontana*.

They also regularly checked the wells in the countryside to see that the water was not left stagnant and that the wells were kept clean and covered. They kept at their *Banca* a set of all weights and measures then in use, and all vendors and traders had to have their weights and measures stamped by the officials of the *Univerista'* before they could make use of them. Finally they had to calculate and fix the fair price of foodstuffs from year to year.

#### *Coat of Arms*

The *Universita'* of Gozo had its own coat-of-arms which consisted of three hills on a black background surmounted by an open crown. This coat-of-arms can still be seen on the facade of the Governor's Palace and over the walled-up old main door of the law courts in the citadel. It is not known when or how the Gozitans acquired or adopted this coat-of-arms but it has been used by them since time immemorial.

#### *Officials of the Universita'*

Apart from the four *jurats* the *Universita'* had the following officials: *The Treasurer*. This official kept all accounts, received dues and payments and paid out sums on the order of the *jurats*.

*The Notary*. This official kept all the records and files of the *Universita'* and drew up and published all contracts entered into by the *Universita'*.

*The Cattapani*. There were four such officials. They had the duty to supervise shops and traders to check their weights and measures and to see that they were not selling goods above the fixed prices. They were also responsible for enforcing all other regulations issued by the *Universita'*.

*The Storekeeper*. He was in charge of all the stores of the *Universita'*.

## *Gozo and its Old City under the Knights of St John*

*The Capitano della Piazza.* He was in charge of all public places and was responsible for keeping public order.

*The Giudici Idiotti.* There were two such officials. They were lay magistrates who heard minor cases where the value did not exceed two *once*.

The *Universita'* had also the following employees on its payroll:

*The Doctor*, whose salary was 140 *scudi* .

*The Surgeon* , whose salary was 50 *scudi* .

*The Herbist (Aromatorio)* , whose salary was 55 *scudi*.

*The Armourer*, whose salary was 33 *scudi*.

*The Teacher of the Grammar School*, whose salary was 20 *scudi*.

### **The Medieval City**

A brief picture has been attempted of the way people in Gozo lived during the period of the Knights of St John. A short description of the city itself now might not be out of place. To the Gozitans the *Gran Castello* is and has always been the city - 'Il-Belt'. To this very day you can find old people in the villages who would not know what you are talking about if you talked to them about the 'citadel or 'Il-Kastell' as to them this place is still 'Il-Belt'. Fortunately the name painted on the wall of the street going up to the Citadel still retains the correct version in Maltese as it is given as 'It-Telgha tal-Belt'.

The citadel in its present proportions and with its streets, (though not their names which are an unfortunate recent addition) has stood probably since before the Norman conquest of 1120 and it contained within its walls not only the houses of the principal families of Gozo and of the other inhabitants, but most of the public buildings and offices. Some of these, including the Church, were rebuilt and enlarged during the 17th century, but otherwise the city remained the same, a medieval city with its small uncomfortable and insanitary houses huddled together and on top of each other filling every space available. For hundreds of years the people of Gozo lived, prayed, made merry and died in this place. It is indeed a great pity that a monument of such great historical importance should have been left to decay and fall into ruin.

Before it was abandoned and left to fall to pieces in the city were to be found

the Church known as the *Matrice* (today the Cathedral), the Palace of the Governor, the Courts of Justice and Public Archives, the Palace of the Bishop of Malta, three prisons, a small hospital for poor women, several large stores of the *Universita'*, the barracks of the garrison, two small chapels, a good number of taverns and shops and several private houses. In 1701 there were still 56 private houses occupied and 17 already abandoned and in a state of decay. There were 68 large cisterns for drinking water which were filled from rain water and water carted from the *Gran Fontana*, the main fresh water spring on the way to Xlendi.

### **Plan to Abandon the City**

Following the siege of 1551, the idea was mooted about that the city should be abandoned and razed to the ground and a new city built on the tableland overlooking Marsalforn Bay, as it was claimed that even if repaired and better fortified, the old city would always remain at the mercy of enemy guns which could be placed on Gelmus hill and on Quljat hill. This hare-brained idea lingered on till 1670 when it was finally put to rest by Count Antonio Mauritio Valperga, an Italian military engineer, who in a report presented to the Council of the Order on the 13th May 1670, rebutted the claims in favour of a new city at Marsalforn and the idea of abandoning the old city. Instead he submitted a plan for strengthening the defences of the old city and for enclosing the whole *Borgo* with new bastions. This plan although approved by the Council, was never carried out as it was too costly, but fortunately it served the purpose of saving the old city.

### **The New Defences of the City**

Although it is generally agreed by all historians that the principal reason why the city of Gozo was captured so easily in 1551 was the poor state of its defences on the south eastern part, built in the old manner without flanking bastions for cross-firing, and without a ditch, the situation was not remedied quickly and it took quite a number of years before it could be said that the fortifications on this side were sufficient to make the city adequately defensible. But little by little things began to improve. A deep ditch was dug extending from the small fort on the east facing Xaghra to the gate on the west. A glacis or esplanade was formed sloping downwards all along this



**The plan of Count Antonio  
Mauritio Valperga for  
Rabat and its *Castello*.**

ditch and no houses were allowed to be built or trees planted in front of the glacis. Two strong bastions, one facing south-east, and the other south-west, (connected with a curtain) were also built. The small fort on the east connected by a tunnel cut into the rock, and a ravelin on the west to guard the gate, completed the outer defences. The ravelin has unfortunately disappeared and been replaced by unsightly constructions.

On the inside, two cavaliers, one of St John facing east, and the other of St Martin facing west, were later added. The city was provided with three powder-stores, one near the old sally-port and the other two on top of the two cavaliers. The access to the city was by means of a long steep flight of steps going up what today is Castle hill, then over a stone bridge turning sharply to the right, then over a wooden drawbridge through a small and low gate. These fortifications rendered the city practically impregnable as on the northern side the high walls were built on unscalable rock cliffs. The city walls were armed with 33 canons distributed along the different vantage points.

Although most of the military engineers who were sent from time to time to inspect the fortifications of the city and suggest improvements drew up



plans of the city, to date only two plans of the old city of Gozo have been uncovered. One is the plan which is to be found in the last plate (Folio XVI) of *The True Depiction of the Investment and Attack suffered by the Island of Malta at the Hands of the Turks in the year of Our Lord 1565* published by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio in 1582. This plan is not at all accurate and does not show any of the buildings or streets; as far as the fortifications are concerned it is most probable that the fortifications shown on this plan were meant to suggest works rather than the actual fortifications of the city at the time. The other plan we know of is the plan of the city and *Borgo* drawn up by Count Valperga and submitted with his report to the Council of the Order. Although the main scope of this plan was to show the new works which Valperga suggested should be made to enclose the whole *Borgo* and make it one whole with the city, it is a very accurate and detailed plan both of the city (citadel) and of the old part of the *Borgo*.

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