

Bernardo De Opuo

Fact or fiction?

JOSEPH BEZZINA

Four hundred and seventy years ago this year, the island of Gozo suffered its worst siege in recorded history. In his *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill[ustriss]ma Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano*, first published in Rome in 1602, Giacomo Bosio, the official historian of the Knights of St John, wrote how *questa tragedia* was consummated on Sunday, 26 July 1551.

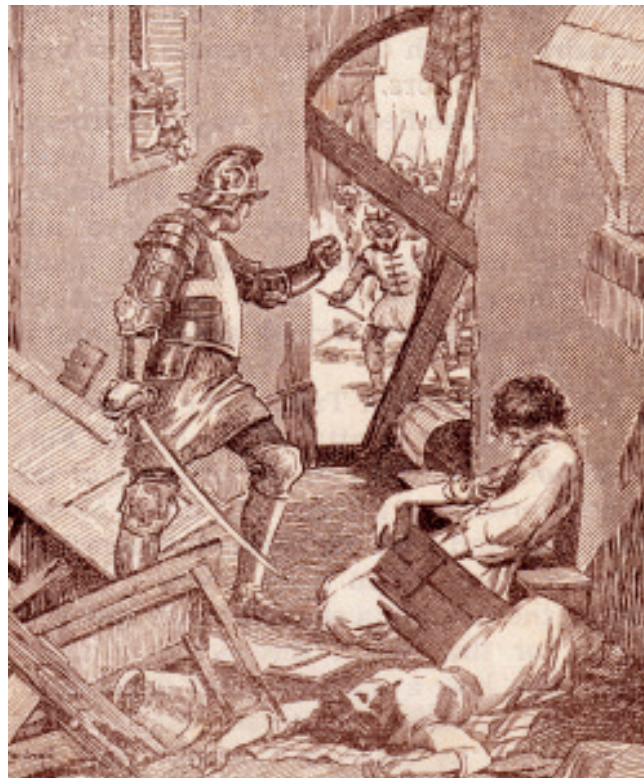
The Ottomans under the military command of Sinan Pasha, a first-grade pasha, and Turgut Reis, the most dangerous corsair in the mid-sixteenth century, known by his peers and in popular culture by his nickname *Dragut*, had laid siege and bombarded the medieval citadel since early Friday morning. On Saturday night, Galatian de Sessé, the Governor of Gozo, in agreement with the principal inhabitants of the citadel, lowered Padre Bartolomeo Bonavia, an Augustinian friar, theologian and preacher, from the walls so as to parley with the enemy. It was agreed that the Gozitans would throw the gates of the citadel open on condition that the Ottomans would leave forty foremost citizens walk free.

The full story of the siege that led to the depopulation of Gozo in 1551 is chronicled in my just published book *1551 – the siege that stifled Gozo*. This contribution regards only *Bernardo De Opuo*, an unsung hero of this tragedy.

No One, Except a Sicilian Soldier

At dawn of Sunday, 26 July 1551, when, as agreed, the gates were thrown open, the Turkish troops did not rush inside. They were afraid of some stratagem and stood in front doubtful whether they could enter unhindered or not. After a few interminable moments, Padre Bonavia walked towards the entrance to let them in peacefully.

Hell, immediately broke loose. One detachment of the Ottomans fell upon the multitude and rounded them up in small groups. A second detachment started to ransack every church, chapel, and building



Bernardo De Opuo with a clenched fist and a drawn sword in his right hand ready to pummel the enemy approaching his home. His two lifeless daughters, that he had just ended their tortuous life, are strewn on his side. Design by Robert Caruana-Dingli (1882-1940) in *Outlines of Maltese History* (1943).

laying their hands on whatever could be carried away and destroying the rest. No one offered them the least resistance. No one, except a Sicilian soldier, Bernardo De Opuo.

In the year 1579, twenty-eight years after the Siege, the *Universitas Gaudisii* unveiled an inscription on the façade of a house inside iċ-Ċittadella in memory of this hero.

1579
AVDACIS MILITI
FORTVNA IVVAT
BERNARDO DE OPVO
SOLDATO IN GOZZO DE
VILLA MIRADOS

Fortune favours the bold combatant – Bernardo De Opuo, soldier in Gozo, from the hamlet of

Mirados. The present inscription *in situ* is a replica; the original is at the Museum of Archaeology, Iċ-Ċittadella.

In 1745, according to De Soldanis, the people held that the inscription had been affixed to the house of De Opuo. In a publication of the University of Malta, this episode was referred to as legendary. Other historians concurred, but sources prove otherwise.

De Bello Melitensi

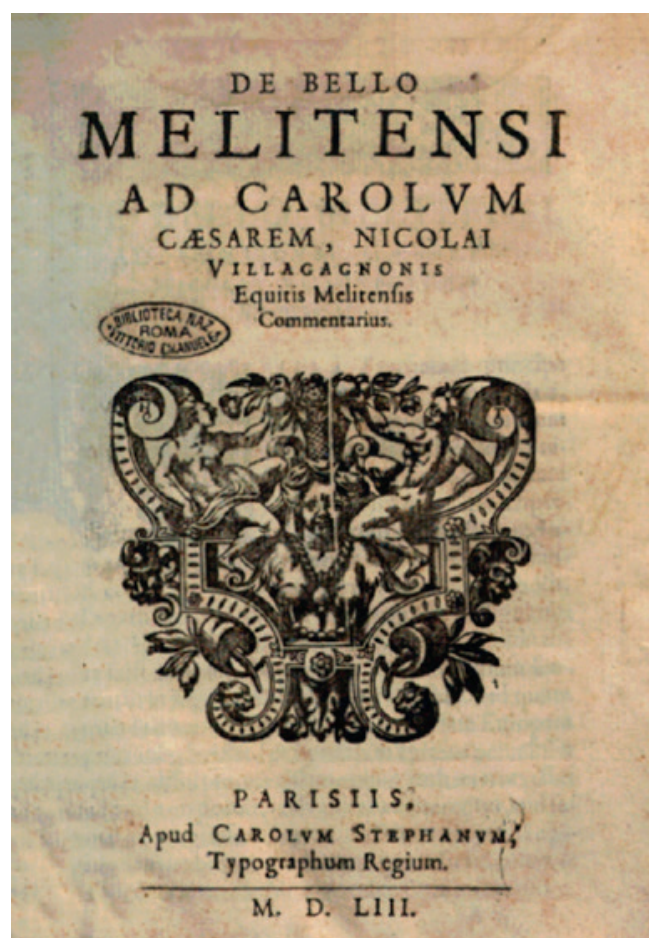
The story of this valiant soldier of Gozo is first recorded by Nicolai Villagagnon in his *De Bello Melitensi* written in the immediate aftermath of the event.

Fra Nicolas Durand de Villagagnon, a nephew of Phillippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam, the first grandmaster in Malta, was a commander of the Knights of Malta and, eventually, vice-admiral of Brittany. He was a notable public figure and a

mixture of soldier, scientist, explorer, adventurer, and entrepreneur. He professed in an account that he penned two years later, that he decided to travel to Malta immediately to offer his assistance during the looming siege of Malta. He left France before a general convocation of the knights, in fulfilment of his duty as a member of the Order so as to offer his help and advice. In *De Bello Melitensi*, published in Paris in 1553, he starts his story with the words: *erat in eorum numero vir Siculus*, there was amongst them a Sicilian.

The story is retold by Nicolas de Nicolay, who was in Malta in August 1551. In his treatise: *Les quatre premiers livres des navigations et peregrinations orientales*, first published in Lyon in 1568, he starts his account: *C'est d'un Sicilien, de long temps habitué en ce lieu*.

De Bello Melitensi, that is quoted at length by Giacomo Bosio in the above quoted book, is reproduced word for word in its original Latin version by René-Aubert Vertot in his *Histoire des*



NICOLAUS VILLAGAGNON, *De bello Melitensi*, Paris 1553. First edition • BN-Biblioteca Nazionale, Rome, Italy.



NICOLAS DE NICOLAY, *Les quatre premiers livres des navigations et peregrinations orientales*, Lyon 1568. First edition • BML – Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon.

Chevaliers Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem appelez depuis Les Chevaliers de Rhodes et aujourd'hui Les Chevaliers de Malte, first published in Paris in 1726. This is how he related the story in his English translation of 1728.

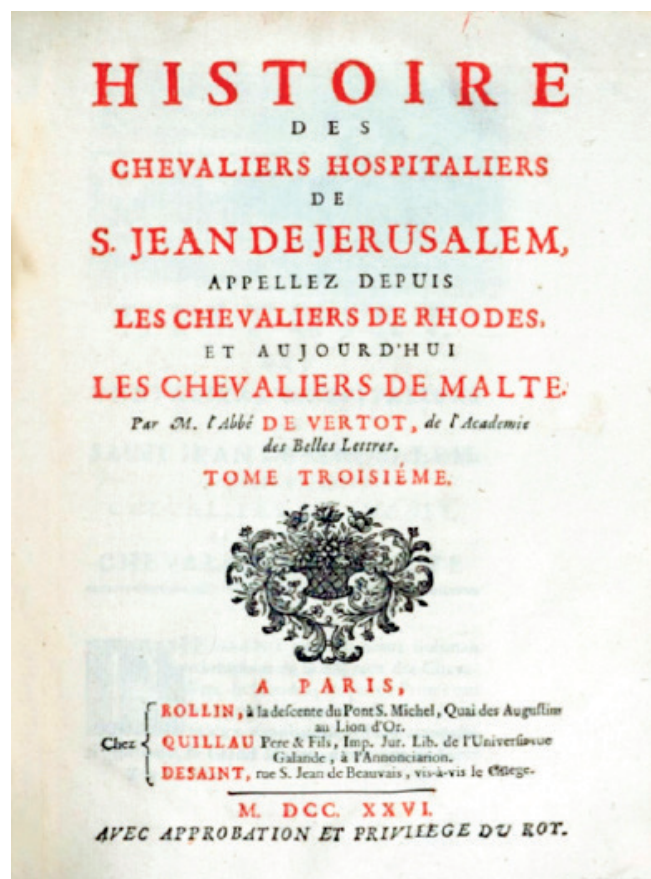
Among these poor inhabitants [of Gozo], there happened to be a Sicilian, that had been settled for many years at Gozo, who preferring death to slavery, delivered himself and all his family, by the inspirations of a bloody compassion, from the hardships and shame that attend upon slavery, after a very tragically manner. The Sicilian, transported with rage and jealousy, stabbed his wife and two young daughters whom he had by her; when resolving not to survive them, he takes up a fusee and a cross-bow, with which he killed two Turks, and afterwards throwing himself sword in hand into the midst of a crowd of enemies, he, after having wounded several of them, was cut to pieces, and met with the death he so eagerly sought after.

Giacomo Bosio, quoting the previous narratives as well as oral sources, concurs with the narrative. He

praises the bravery of this *soldato Siciliano* as he was one of the few who dared to offer resistance to the Turks. During the siege, he carried out his duties with untold bravery, but he was aware that the citadel could not hold out for long. Part of the outer fortifications were collapsing and the besieging army far outnumbered the defenders inside. As a knight, loyal to his oath of service, it was not certain death that troubled him, but the plight of his wife and daughters. He knew only too well what would happen if they were dragged away to slavery in a foreign land. So, he stabbed them one after another and was soon afterwards killed himself while fighting the Turks.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne

The story of Bernardo caught the attention of none other than Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (23 Feb 1533–13 Sep 1592), the famous French essayist, one of the most significant philosophers of the French Renaissance, and widely regarded as the originator of the modern essay. He wrote about prominent



RENÉ-AUBERT DE VERTOT [L'ABBÉ VERTOT], *Histoire des Chevaliers Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem*..., Paris 1726 • BnF.



Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1570s) by an unknown artist • Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux.

personalities and ideas of his age in his sceptical *Essais*. In one of them, *Coustume de l'Isle de Cea*, an early essay written in the 1572–74 period, he refers to the Gozo episode.

This essay was first published in Book I, Chapter 3, in the first edition of the *Essais* of 1580. However, the Gozo episode does not appear in this first edition, nor in the following two expanded editions, nor in the subsequent major edition of 1588. However, De Montaigne continued to revise the text, to make improvements, and insert additions until his death in 1592. A famous copy of the 1588 edition – known as the *Exemplaire de Bordeaux* – on which the author made these revisions is considered to be Montaigne's last literary wish.

The *Exemplaire de Bordeaux* – so called as the revision was carried out on the family estate at Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne, close to Bordeaux – is conserved at the *Musée d'Aquitaine*, Bordeaux. It includes the addition of the Gozo episode to the essay *Coustume de l'Isle de Cea* in his own hand.

This particular essay is considered a rhetorical masterpiece and it carries, as in other essays, an oblique title where the basic subject of the essay is reached only at its end. After a short preface, it deals with suicide from beginning to end – a rather dangerous theme to discuss in writing in 1580 if the author was not prepared to condemn it outright.

Montaigne argues both sides of the argument. He begins with a pro-suicide argument. Death is the *prescription for all our ills*, it is not to be feared. On the other hand, to kill oneself for any reason is not acceptable, there must be some moderation so that one's life is not ended over a minor incident. Yet if Fortune has given us such a blow that it is clear we cannot hope for life, we can choose death. Death is also permitted at one's discretion in order to avoid a worse one. Montaigne gives one example after another of suicide in order to keep one's honour or to avoid slavery or torture and death at the hands of the enemy. It is at this point that he inserted the story of Bernardo.

L'isle de Goze forcée par les Turcs, il y a quelques années, un Sicilien qui avoit deux belles filles prestes à marier, les tua de sa main, et leur mere apres, qui accourut à leur mort. Cela faict, sortant en ruë avec une arbaleste et une arquebouze, de deux coups il en

tua les deux premiers Turcs, qui s'approcherent de sa porte : et puis mettant l'espée au poing, s'alla mesler furieusement, où il fut soudain envelopé et mis en pieces : se sauvant ainsi du servage, apres en avoir delivré les siens.

When the Turks took the island of Gozo by storm a few years ago, a Sicilian, who had two beautiful daughters ready for marriage, killed them with his own hand, and, after them their mother, who came running up at their death. This done, he went out into the street with a cross-bow and harquebus, and two shots killed the first two Turks who approached his door; and then, taking sword in hand, he went furiously into the melee, where he was suddenly immediately surrounded and cut to pieces, thus saving himself from slavery after delivering his family from it.

The Inscription of 1579

Villagagnon and Nicolas de Nicolay refer to this hero without identifying him. His name is known from the 1579 inscription mentioned supra.

It is almost certain that it was the Governor with the *Universitas* that took the initiative to commemorate this valiant soldier. Fra Bernardo d'Aldana, the Governor of Gozo at that time (1578–1581), was a contemporary of the 1551 Siege. A well-known *Generale dell'Artiglieria*, he commanded artilleries in the Papal States in 1556–57, and in the planned, but eventually aborted, attempt to retake Tripoli in 1559. He resided inside the citadel and he must have heard an account of what happened from the survivors themselves, foremost amongst them Don Lorenzo de Apapis, then vicar at the Matrice and a citadel resident.

The inscription is surmounted by the date 1579, intertwined with a fleur-de-lis – a stylise lily composed of three petals bound together near their bases. It is especially known from the former royal arms of France, in which it appears in gold on a blue field.

The inscription starts with a widely diffused Latin proverb *audacis militi fortuna iuvat*. This axiom exists in several forms with slightly different wording but effectively identical meaning – *Fortune favours the bold combatant*. The closest in classical writings is *audentis Fortuna iuvat*, a phrase uttered by Turnus, the major antagonist of Aeneas, in the *Aeneid* by Virgil (VIRGIL *Aeneid* X, 284). *Fortuna*

raison humaine, cet accident de malheur, qu'il s'en vend delivré sans aucun inconuenient. Et Callius & Brutus au contraire, acheuerent de perdre les reliques de la Romaine liberté, de laquelle ils estoient protecteurs, par la precipitation & temerité, de quoy ils se tintent auant le temps & l'occasion.

Mais dicit variis que labor matabilis aui

Refulsit in melius, postea aliter reuifcit

La fin, ce en solide sur son fortune la suit.

Plin dit qu'il n'y a que trois sortes de maladie, pour lesquelles eurer on aye accoustumé de se tuer la plus apte de toutes c'est la pierre à la vessie, quand l'urine en est retenue: la seconde de la douleur d'estomach, la tierce, la douleur de teste. Pour euitter vne pire mort, il y en a qui sont d'aduis de la prendre à leur poste. Les femmes Iuifues apres auoir fait circueire leurs enfans, falloient precipiter quât de eux, fuyât la cruauté d'Antiochus. On m'a conté qu'en prisonnier de qualité, estant en nos conciergeries, les parens aduertis qu'il seroit certaiement condamné, pour euitter la honte de telle mort, apostiferent un prestre pour luy dire, que le Souuerain remede de sa deliurance, estoit qu'il se recommandast à tel saint, avec tel & tel vœu, & qu'il fut huit iours sans prendre aucun alimēt, quelque de faillance & foiblesse qu'il sentit en soy. Il l'en creut, & par ce moyen se desist sans y penser de sa vie & du dangier. Scribonia conseillant Libo son nepueu de se tuer, plustost que d'attendre la main de la justice, luy disoit, que c'estoit proprement faire l'affaire d'autrui, q̃ de cōseruer sa vie, pour la remettre entre les mains de ceux qui la viendroient chercher trois ou quatre iours apres; & que c'estoit seruir ses ennemis, de garder son sang pour leur en faire curée. Il se liēt dans la Bible, que Nicanor persecuteur de la Loy de Dieu, ayant enuoyé ses satellites pour saisir le bon vieillard Rabsas, surnommé pour l'honneur de sa vertu, le pere aux Iuifs, comme ce bon homme

O o ij



The inscription on the façade of the house of Bernardo De Opuo (1579), now at the Gozo Museum. It is replaced in situ by a replica • Heritage Malta / Daniel Cilia.

refers to luck or its personification, a Roman goddess.

This is followed by the name of the bold combatant, *Bernardo De Opuo*, identified as a *soldato in Gozzo*, a soldier in Gozo. It then refers to his stock, *de Villa Mirados*, that is, *from the hamlet of Mirados*. The word *villa* in late medieval times referred to a *piccolo centro rurale*, a small rural centre, hence a village or hamlet. He hailed from the otherwise unidentified village of *Mirados*, possibly a Castilian toponym, at a time when Sicily had been under the Aragonese for close to three centuries.

It is clear that the valour of De Opuo had remained alive in the collective memory.

The above is a résumé of the relative chapter in my book *1551 – the siege that stifled Gozo*, published and launched in November 2021 by the Cultural Heritage Directorate, Ministry for Gozo, on the 470th anniversary of the siege of Gozo.

Joseph Bezzina, born in Victoria, Gozo, is a graduate of the University of Malta and the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, from where he earned a first-class Honours doctorate in Church History. He was for seventeen years Head of the Department of Church History at the University of Malta. In 1989, he founded the Gozo Section of the *National Archives*, which he directed until his retirement in 2020. During the same time, he was Assistant National Archivist. He is the author of close to eighty books and many studies published in English, Maltese, French, German, and Italian.