

## **DON LORENZO DE APAPIS (1501c.-1586) A SIXTEENTH CENTURY PARISH PRIEST AND NOTARY**

**Eugene F. Montanaro**

**H**earth was what the people needed during the darkest century of Gozo's history, and Don Lorenzo de Apapis was the man to provide it.

For a skeletal biography of Don Lorenzo de Apapis there are three principal sources of information, namely, Monsignor Pietro Dusina's report of 1575, the notarial register of Don Lorenzo de Apapis, and Don Lorenzo de Apapis' last will and testament.

When the Apostolic Visitor, Mons. Pietro Dusina, visited Gozo, in the year 1575, Don Lorenzo was 74 years old "*etatis annorum septuaginta quatuor*". Hence he was born *circa* 1501. In Dusina's report, Don Lorenzo is qualified as "*Presbyter Gaulorum, et Vicarius Foraneus*". We also learn from Dusina's report that Don Lorenzo was Parish Priest at the Parish Church of Saint George.

### **Family Background**

By means of his will, published by Notary Tommaso Gauci on 9 May 1579, Don Lorenzo established a benefice, which he endowed with a parcel of land in the district *Nigleret*, designated *Nigrit*. He ordained that the first beneficiary of the endowment was to be his relative, the *Chierico* Giovanni Domenico Vella. Successive beneficiaries were to be appointed by the descendants of his heirs, in perpetuity. And from the *Guljanas* relative to Gozitan benefices, and drawn up during the 17th and 18th centuries, we come to discover the identity of quite a number of descendants of the heirs of Don Lorenzo de Apapis. We learn, among other things, that Don Lorenzo de Apapis was the son of Leonardo Apap and Garita née

Debuis. In 1509, his uncle, Don Antonio Apap, had founded the benefice *Ta Guet Milach* alias *El Habel ta Don Laurenzo*, in the district *Ta Habel Melach*.

From the *Guljanas*, it would appear that the descendants of Don Lorenzo's heirs tended to mix with the leading, well-to-do families of these islands. Let us take some random examples. Don Lorenzo's sister, whose Christian name remains obscure, married Mario Testaferrata, and her daughter Antonia in turn married the Noble Salvus Vella. In 1589, Antonia's son, the Chierico Giovanni Domenico Vella, married Maddalena, the daughter of Dottor Melchiorre Cagliares. Their son, Dottor Melchiorre Vella Cagliares married Gusmana Cumbo – better known as Gusmana Navarra – at Mdina, on 15 November 1615. Our information concerning Don Lorenzo's family background remains scanty, but not altogether obscure!

However, for a fair appraisal of the man – Don Lorenzo de Apapis – it becomes imperative for us to capture the flavour of the age in which he lived, through events both great and small. Above all, his achievements, as well as his failings, ought to be measured against the background of the standards and accepted opinions of this age.

During the first half of the 16th century, Gozitan society still comprised a handful of noble families, evidently of Sicilian origin. The island was apparently a place of exile; indeed, in 1538, Jean De La Vallette, the future Grand Master, was sentenced to four months jail in Gozo, to be followed immediately by an uninterrupted two-year confinement to Tripoli, for aggressive behaviour. At the same time, most of the *beduini* on Gozo did own small parcels of land, in contrast to the Sicilian situation where farmers owned no land, which belonged in its entirety to the Crown, the Barons or the Church. Gozo, however, was not strong enough to repel the constant *razzias* effected by Muslim corsairs, most notably by Dragut.

It emerges from various contemporary sources that Don Lorenzo's family belonged to the landed gentry. Don Lorenzo was born, relatively speaking, a wealthy man. By the end of his long life he was a revered priest and notary public, but success never spoilt him. Even in his 80s he still worked tirelessly, in spite of his having experienced a two-year stint as a Turkish slave, following the 1551 invasion of Gozo by the Muslims.

Gozo, of course, had no Seminary, the clergy being trained largely by an apprenticeship-like system. This was no different from the situation in Malta and in so many other places abroad. It is also worthwhile to recall that, in the presence of Mons Pietro Dusina, Don Lorenzo himself asserted: “*Qui non c’è Mastro di Scola*”.

In these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that Don Lorenzo vindicated his priestly orders with these very words:

*“La prima tonsura me la diede insieme con li quattro ordini minori in un giorno insieme il Vescovo de Nasis dell’Ordine di San Domenico che era titolare, et pagai due scuti per questi Ordini, et me li domandò prima che mi ordinasse, perche altrimenti non mi haveva ordinato, et ebbi la licenza dal Vicario... et havea allora d’anni venti cinque in ventisei... et mi ordinai in una Quadragesima, et per questi Ordini Sacri, cioè del subdiaconato pagai un scuto... per l’altri Ordini non ho pagato niente...”*

Turning to his office of Parish Priest, Don Lorenzo informed Mons. Dusina that “*La mia Parochiale mi fù conferita dalla bona memoria di Monsignor Cubelles, et perchè un’altro l’haveva impetrata prima in Roma, il Vescovo mi disse che io li pagassi una pensione di cinque ducati...*” Clearly, Don Lorenzo’s speech was particularly incisive.

Don Lorenzo de Apapis was a character, and being Gozitan, he was a Gozitan character. His speech in the presence of Mons Dusina, is a remarkable combination of respect, heroic outspokenness and outright familiarity, all attributes which in Gozo are generally accepted as a national characteristic. We have noted that he held the office of vicar *foraneus*, a cleric who held his ecclesiastical court with right of appeal to the vicar general’s court in Malta (or the bishop’s court, when the bishop happened to be on the island). From his birthplace, Don Lorenzo inherited “a factual tone”, which is perhaps best exemplified by the words he utters to illustrate one particular aspect of his work as vicar *foraneus*:

*“Li di’ di festa dichiaro l’Evangelo al Popolo, et contra quelli che non servano le feste ci sono due pene, una pecuniaria, et l’altra corporale... la pena pecuniaria è di sette tarini e mezzo, et poche volte s’esige, la faccio distribuir a poveri, ma quando non la volessi dar a poveri, la piglieria per me, perche a me tocca”.*



enemy, and the Gozitan bulldog was forced to lick his wounds and await a better day.

### **1551: The Supreme Test**

Don Lorenzo's was a life spent, it seems in retrospect, in meticulous preparation for the supreme test which awaited him in 1551-1552. Sixteenth-century life on Gozo was characterised by a protracted series of corsair incursions, increasingly daring in conception and execution and devastating in consequence. In his study *The Maltese Corsair and The Order of Saint John of Jerusalem*, Dr Paul Cassar has shown that, in regard to piracy, our ancestors appear to have been sinners as well as sinned against. It is undeniable, however, that the Ottomans, who had ousted the Knights of St John from Rhodes in 1522, now turned their eyes on the Maltese Islands in their bid to rid themselves of the Order once and for all from the Central Mediterranean.

1551 was a brutal, bloodstained year for Gozo; not so bad if you were a Muslim, but exceedingly dangerous if you were an unarmed peasant or, indeed, a member of the educated sedentary class. This was the fateful year which saw the dispersal and destruction of most of the community on the island. The Turks under the leadership of Sinan Pasha and Dragut crossed over to Gozo on 22 July, after plundering the Maltese countryside. The Gozitans withdrew into the Castello. Sinan Pasha deployed his artillery near Rabat's Main Gate and in the immediate precincts of the Parish Church of Saint George. Giacomo Bosio recounts how the bombardment of the Castello began on Friday 24 July, half an hour before noon: "*Sinam Bascia... fece nondimeno sbarcar nove grossi connoni, con molt'altri pezzi d'artiglieria minuta. E piantate havendone parte alla banda di Sirocco, nel luogo della Porta Reale del Rabbato, e parte per mezogiorno, alla Chiesa di San Giorgio, con giusta e incrociata batteria, cominciò a battere le muraglia, nel Venerdì, a 24 Luglio, mez' hora innanzi al giorno, e andò sempre con gran furia, e con gran fracasso continuando fin alla seguente Domenica...*"

Sunday 26 July saw the end of the tragedy when the doors of the Castello were opened for the enemy to ransack the fortress. Some 700 soldiery and from five to six thousand souls were dragged into slavery. A few hundred

Gozitans are reputed to have escaped over the walls of the Castello during the night-time, and the enemy also seems to have spared some 40 old and decrepit men. The Gozitan prisoners, amongst them Don Lorenzo de Apapis, were taken on board the Turkish vessels, at first to the next stopping place, the neighbourhood of Tripoli, and after the fall of that town, to Constantinople.

It must be said here that the well-to-do Gozitans who were taken into slavery in 1551, soon got themselves ransomed because they possessed the necessary means to do so. Don Lorenzo de Apapis was certainly back in Malta, more precisely in Birgu, by 28 October 1553. On that very day he published the will of the Gozitan Guillelmus de Manuele alias Mollica.

Once ransomed from slavery, Don Lorenzo was plunged into the role of leader of the Gozitan community at the darkest moment in his island's history. He was no longer a young man. The physical and mental burden he bore every single day thereafter would have broken men half his age. Professor Stanley Fiorini (1986) has argued convincingly that the population in Gozo increased in size only gradually, and that it took about a century to reach the level of 1551. Poverty and hunger were rampant. The other major headache for Don Lorenzo and his fellow Gozitans, was the safety of the island. The island still lacked adequate coastal defences. Raiding by corsairs continued during the latter part of the sixteenth century. There are records of attacks in 1560, 1563, 1572, 1574, 1582, 1589 and 1599. In 1582 four galiots from Bizerta put a raiding party ashore and some 70 persons were taken in slavery from Rabat.

### **Mons Pietro Dusina's Visit**

Hence it comes as no surprise that when Mons Pietro Dusina visited Gozo in 1575, the Parish Church of St George – the Church administered by Don Lorenzo – was in shambles. Following each and every Muslim raid, the very walls of that Church needed buttressing or reconstruction. This results very clearly from the notarial register of Don Lorenzo de Apapis. During the course of the years 1560-1565 a number of well-to-do Gozitans bequeathed legacies to be employed in the maintenance and reconstruction expenses of the Church. The standard legacy in this respect, runs as follows: "*Item pro suis male ablatio incertis legavit ecclesiae parrochiali*

*Sancti Georgii Rabbati Guadisii pro suis marammatibus et reparationibus tarenos...*” – this particular legacy was in fact bequeathed by Margarita widow of Antonius Farruge, in her will published by Don Lorenzo de Apapis on 28 March 1560.

In this frightening scenario, Don Lorenzo contributed generously towards the upkeep and running of the Parish Church under his care, the more so since his parishioners were now few and poor. For example, from his own pocket he defrayed the expenses incurred in the purchase of wax and oil for use at the Church of Saint George:

*“... et io non sono obligato di comprare cera, ne oglio alla Parrochia, perche le comprano li Parochiani prima che se ne erano assai, ma da poi che sono stati pochi, et poveri, che non hanno potuto, l’ho comprato io”.*

Clearly, the Gozitan’s powers of resilience were remarkable, if not miraculous. Don Lorenzo and the survivors of the *razzia* of 1551, stood to be counted, and held their ground. In this respect, de Apapis is to be all the more commended since with his professional background and wealth, he could easily have retired to a life of peace and comfort in nearby Sicily, or even Italy. But the task he chose to affront was nothing less than an interminable struggle to ensure the survival of his island home.

De Apapis, it is true, was rarely out of controversy or confrontation, and never out of earshot. It appears he would do anything to keep busy in time of stress. He was at times pugnacious and assertive; he is known to have refused assistance to Don Leonardi De Dallo, the Rector of Savina Church, when the latter requested him to furnish the means to light the candles at Savina. De Apapis however vindicated his conduct on the grounds that one occasion, de Dallo *“l’habbia maltrattato et messo li mani addosso”*. Again, Mons Dusina had felt it his duty to admonish Don Lorenzo for resorting to the Gallican rite when celebrating Mass. Local historians have tended to blow up these petty failings of his out of all proportion.

On the other hand, it is most unfortunate that the memory of Don Lorenzo de Apapis has been tarnished by the assertion made in a recent publication, that Mons Dusina instructed Don Lorenzo to refrain from

selling merchandise from a shop owned by him. This gross historical injustice results from a misinterpretation, or, better still, incorrect translation of the words “*Dominus habita notitia, quod predictus Don Laurentius publice Tabellionatus officio fungatur...*” The word “*tabellione*” denotes a notary public, a member of the legal profession duly authorised to draw up and publish public deeds – it does not denote a shopkeeper!

None the less, the blunder has served to obfuscate a significant aspect of Don Lorenzo’s personal history and productive achievement. Indeed, as we shall see, communal solidarity is also at play in much of Don Lorenzo’s professional work as a notary.

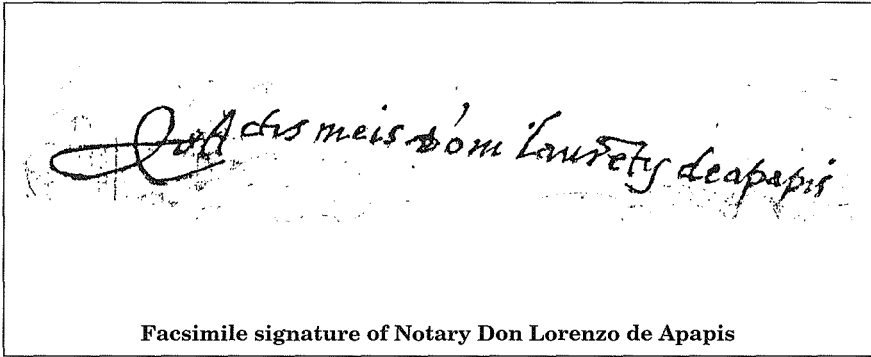
### The Notarial Register

The notarial register of Don Lorenzo de Apapis comprises some 104 notarial deeds, and is preserved for posterity at the Notarial Archives at Valletta. The register contains some 212 folios, and has an index. The deeds are written in Latin, but in common with most contemporary Maltese notaries, Don Lorenzo does on occasion resort to technical terms current in Sicily – “*marammatibus*” for example. Now in his report of 1575, Mons Dusina asserts that Don Lorenzo knew very little Latin – *aliquantulum* is the word used by Dusina. On the other hand, the deeds in the register suggest that Don Lorenzo was a fluent writer of Latin. Besides, the deeds also suggest that he did pursue a course of legal studies. Certainly, Don Lorenzo had a reasonably sound knowledge of the intricacies of the Roman law of succession.

Don Lorenzo practised his profession as a notary during the course of the years 1540-1583. His notarial register contains no deeds for the period running from March 1551 to September 1553 – roughly a two-year interruption which seems to tally with the period of time he spent in captivity. Perhaps a matter of further interest is the assertion made by Don Lorenzo in the presence of Mons Dusina, that he charged a standard fee of a *tarino* for his efforts: “... *et quando uno viene per presentare qualche scrittura, io ce metto la mano per presentazione, et mi tocca un tarino...*”

Don Lorenzo’s notarial register bears two very confused titles, namely (1)





*Testamentarium Publici Tabelionis Per Apostolica Auctoritate*, and (2) *Registro del Not. Don Lorenzo Apapis*. Both titles, it would appear are eighteenth-century accretions. They certainly did not emanate from Don Lorenzo's own hand. Now it must be admitted that practically all the deeds in Don Lorenzo's notarial register are wills. But in spite of one of its titles, the register is not a register of wills, for it does comprise a couple of deeds of sale and the occasional Inventory of Immovable Property. Curiously enough, the register contains no marriage settlements. On further reflection, however, the abundance of wills in Don Lorenzo's notarial register is not so anomalous, but rather somewhat redolent of the social vicissitudes of contemporary fellow Gozitans.

The explanation for this lies in the fact that for years after the *razzia* of 1551, Gozitan captives were to be found in Constantinople, interminably negotiating their release or reporting each other's death to enable their next of kin to dispose of their property, and husbands and wives to remarry. It took time for things to settle down again, and for life to assume its normal tenor. The depopulation of Gozo gave raise to several litigations concerning the captives' property.

In the prevailing circumstances, public wills became useful instruments for vindicating and clarifying title to property after one's death. And it is fairly evident that this expedient was resorted to both by the landed gentry and by the peasants who owned small parcels of land. But quite a number of Gozitan testators were also anxious to bequeath legacies to be employed in the redemption from captivity of their relatives and immediate next of kin. It is important to recall that during the years

1540-1557, Don Lorenzo de Apapis was the sole native-born Gozitan notary exercising the notarial profession on Gozo. Few, if any, on the island could read and write. De Apapis was, so to say, the right man at the right place. And it can hardly be doubted that in the eyes of the small Gozitan community, De Apapis became something of a celebrity, a personality warranting respect and deference. Be that as it may, his house was open to rich and poor alike, his services were offered to one and all.

The wills in don Lorenzo's notarial register, set in an identifiable context, have in fact proved an indispensable tool for historians seeking to reconstruct the sombre history of Gozo, for the period 1551 - 1600. Thus, in his study concerning the island's resettlement following the Muslim attack of 1551, Professor Stanley Fiorini writes: "What evidence there is for the information available is mainly gleaned from the deeds of notaries working in Gozo during the period under review: 1551c - 1600. The more important of these were the Gozitan Notary Don Lorenzo de Apapis (1540-1583) and the two Maltese notaries Thomas Gauci (1557 - 1616) and Ferdinando Ciappara (1573 - 1610)". (Fiorini 1986: 206-207). Moreover, the deeds in the register also offer valuable information concerning the old Gozitan place-names. In this regard, Professor Godfrey Wettinger remarks: "Notary Laurencius de Apapis resumed his activity as a notary after his return from captivity, drawing up innumerable wills referring to places by their old names familiar to him from pre-1551 days" (Wettinger 1980: 198).

Put another way, there can be scarcely any other notary in our islands whose life was so bound up with the events of his time, and so compellingly illustrative of them, as Don Lorenzo's.

But there is more to it than that. Don Lorenzo ignored personal risk to travel to enemy territory to visit fellow-Gozitans, and offer them his services and support. The Magnifica Domina Damma Rapa was fortunate enough to possess the financial means to buy herself out of her captivity. But for some unknown reason she was detained at Constantinople, and on 15 May 1555, Don Lorenzo de Apapis published her will (sic) "*apud civitatem Constantinopolim intus cortile domorum Magnifici domini oratoris Sacre Majestatis Domini Regis Francorum*".

Tragedy and war did not halt Don Lorenzo's endeavours to alleviate the plight of his parish and his fellow-Gozitans. Indeed, the Great Siege of 1565 saw him on in Birgu. On 12 August 1565, he published at Birgu the will of "*Antonella mulier uxor Antonij de Amfasino habitatrix terre et Insule Guadisij degens ad presens in hac nova civitate Melite*"

That staunch woman, Antonella de Amfasino, remained steadfast in her loyalty to her Gozitan parish, and amidst the clamour of screaming men, and no doubt apprehensive at the glint of steel catching the bright sunlight, resolved to bequeath a legacy of two *tareni* to the Gozitan Parish Church of St George. And de Apapis, ever daring and indefatigable, always sought ways of taking the battle to the adversary.

### **The Will of Don Lorenzo de Apapis**

In a public life spanning nearly 50 years, de Apapis held three important offices, that of Parish Priest, Vicar Foraneus, and notary public. His visits to and dealings with Malta and alien lands were numerous down the years. He endured, and survived, captivity, and the hardships of two terrible sieges. When he died in 1586, aged 85, he was the most well-known man in Gozo, and perhaps the greatest Gozitan of the century.

Monsignor Dusina's report of 1575 tends to show that problems of eradicating superstition and ignorance and enforcing celibacy of the clergy were as serious in the Maltese Islands as anywhere else at the time. But from what we have already recounted, it emerges clearly that Don Lorenzo de Apapis was generally inclined to practise the beliefs he preached to his flock. A final glimpse of his benevolence and humanitarian spirit is caught by a random inspection of certain dispositions contained in his will, published by Notary Tommaso Gauci on 9 May 1579. Therein, he bequeathed legacies to the Venerable Hospital of Saint Julian at Gozo, to the poor on the island, to the Corpus Christi Confraternity, and to the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary. He founded a marriage legacy for orphaned girls, and endowed it with the income to be derived from land situated in the district of Żebbuġ.

His relatives also stood to benefit by his will. He appointed as his sole universal heir, his sister's daughter, namely, Antonia wife of the noble

Salvus Vella. To Antonia Vella he also bequeathed his dwelling house, situate within the Castello. "*loco domorum palatiato cum eius stantiis... in quo ad praesens ipse Reverendus testator habitat, positus intus hoc castrum gausdisii in ruga di cashio...*"

To the Chierico Giovanni Domenico Vella, Don Lorenzo bequeathed his chalice and his religious books.

Finally, Don Lorenzo ordained that he was to be buried in the *matrice*: "... *ac voluit et mandavit quod eius cadaver sepelliatur et sepelliri debeat intus matricem ecclesiam istius Insulae gausdisi...*"

Don Lorenzo's will is a remarkable document. It gives the most succinct and purposeful exegesis of the testator's beliefs and aspirations. Written at the time when a dying man sees his whole life as one and makes his final assessments, it has the importance of a final souvenir and of piece of evidence crucial to the understanding of a man, who, though he may have ended his life on a lonely isle of misery and neglect, wished nevertheless to discharge what he believed to be a sacred debt towards his relatives and his beloved country.

### **A Forgotten Personality**

It remains impossible to give a complete narrative of Don Lorenzo's career, or an exhaustive analysis of his thought. That exercise would require the availability of additional primary sources concerning his personal history and writings, if they exist at all! It will take generations to reach a satisfactory estimate of the man, of his contribution to the well-being of his fellow-Gozitans.

We live in an age when the vilification of our heroes is the norm rather than the exception, and where respect for such qualities as courage and dedication plays a very poor second in our media to the desire to expose any and every flaw.

It is to be hoped that the Gozitans can spare a moment for reflection and salute a man who was never devoid of hope, and who cherished above all things the well-being of his island-home.

The world is so interconnected, especially today, that boundaries are beginning to disappear and chauvinism has little place in it. Great men and great events are not the property of any given nation. None the less, it seems that past generations have forgetfully overlooked a Gozitan who had an uncanny ability to make do with what's available, and a wonderful resourcefulness that always finds the right solution to a problem. Somehow, Don Lorenzo de Apapis makes one feel good to be Gozitan!

## References

### Archives:

*National Library of Malta*, Lib. MS 643; Visita di Dusina.

*Notarial Archives Valetta, Notary Lorenzo de Apapis*, R 203/1 (sole surviving notarial register of Notary de Apapis).

*Notarial Archives Valetta, Notary Tommaso Gauci*, R287/9, (9.V. \ 1579), 223: (Will of Notary Don Lorenzo de Apapis).

*Franciscan Provincial Archives*, Valetta, MS Guljana, Vol. 3; Vol. 6.

**Cassar, P.** (1963). "The Maltese Corsiar and the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem." *Scientia*, 29: 1,2, Malta.

**Fiorini, S.** (1986). "The Resettlement of Gozo after 1551." *Melita Historica*, IX (3): 203-246

**Fiorini, S.** (1995). "Malta towards the End of the 15th Century." In *The Origin of Franciscanism in Malta*. Malta: Tau.

**Wettinger, G.** (1980). "The Placenames and the Personal Nomenclature of Gozo: 1372-1600." *Oriental Studies*, Leeds University Oriental Society, Near Eastern Researches II (Edition in honour of Benedict S.J. Isserlin): 173-198.