

MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY GOZO FROM AN UNPUBLISHED CONTEMPORARY SOURCE

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A slim manuscript volume containing sixty-four pages and three pages of a rudimentary index throws considerable light on life in Gozo in the mid-1800s. The volume written in Italian and measuring 22 cm by 16 cm has a very modest and unobtrusive title page. In block letters we find the word 'GOZO' to which the words '*memorie sul*' were subsequently added, thus resulting in the title of '*Memorie sul Gozo*'.

The origin and authorship of the volume is unknown. It was found among the papers of my late father and there are no indications at all of how, why and when it came to be written. It is penned in a very clear hand and by a very organised and observant person who, it seems, was determined to record certain events, incidents and personalities. He was also remarkably interested in the topography of Gozo, very carefully listing places and minutely describing locations. It appears to have been written over a span of time, maybe years. There are indications that he added on to what he had written earlier and in very few cases are there traces of '*pentimento*'.

An Observant Author

I am most intrigued by the identity of the author. He appears to be a non-Gozitan, possibly someone from Malta who had a job to do in Gozo, or a civil servant transferred, or possibly promoted, to Gozo. I deduce this from the fact that he seems bent not only on 'discovering' Gozo but in recording very carefully his 'discoveries'. An interesting observation is the fact that not even the minutest detail escapes his notice. It is more than obvious that the notes were for his personal use or reference as there

appears no intention at all from the contents, layout and presentation of this document to indicate that they were meant for publication in any form. The author is definitely an incurable note-taker who seems to have been intoxicated with Gozo as little by little he explored it village by village, location by location recording this along the way.

Basing myself on facts gleaned from other sources and comparing the unmistakable handwriting I venture to suggest that the author is Gio-Francesco Fenech who was a Registrar of the Gozo Courts in the mid - 1800s. This is confirmed by several other manuscripts in another volume in my possession. This volume contains specimens or in certain cases copies of judicial acts of the Gozo Courts. There is also a detailed description in this latter volume of a post-mortem examination. In this particular volume there are copies of documents in which he gives his name and describes his position as that of '*Registratore*'. I believe that it would be useful to probe further into the identity of this person as he seems to have been a very meticulous, well-read and organised person. He probably hailed from Cospicua because in the manuscript we are discussing today there is a detailed timed trip from Cospicua to Rabat Gozo.

Communications between Gozo and Malta

Communications between Malta and Gozo have always been a subject close to the heart of people in Gozo. Today one can cross over by air, by sea and even by skimming over the waves. Time has been compressed in a way that it takes you literally minutes to cross the distance between the two islands: not so at the time this manuscript was written. The sea crossing alone took 1 hour 15 minutes. A trip from Cospicua to Rabat, Gozo by coach with two horses and by boat from Marfa to Mgarr made by the author on Tuesday 8th November 1859 took 5 hours and 45 minutes. He meticulously breaks down the journey and carefully notes that the weather was good. He also notes the distances from one place to the next. He also indicates which direction of the wind is favourable for the boats crossing in either direction. As we are dealing with lateen boats with sails, we can image how sensitive it would have been to have the right wind blowing. He carefully lists the best wind direction for boats proceeding from Marfa such as the south wind and south west as well as the north

Notari del Gozo. — nel 1858

Judoro Xuezeb Fa liena ie figlio di Elena — eu tal katar.

Giuseppe Grima (tar-ragna)

Giuseppe Cremona tal Galia — ie ta Galia

Antonio Salibra (ta Gaskal tal rain)

Antonio Portelli (ta c-ot.)

Nicolo Tabona (Pecieru.) mori 29. Gennaio 1862. —

Nicolo' Causini (ta Causin tu boros.) eu ta Sidora, eu ta liena eu
ta C-ogs-og. (lepp' Cioqioff)

Michel' Anjelo Rafalo (pavre) (ta pau KK ta bronka.)

— Vincenzo Rafalo (figlio)

— Giorgio Mallia (ta Tabib ic-c-keiken.)

— Francesco Calleja (ta Annuta Bru.)

A list of Gozitan notaries in 1858, reproduced from *Memorie sul Gozo*.

east. He then cautiously notes that '*col maltempo non valgano niente questi venti ma valgano col buon tempo*'.

From Gozo to Malta the best winds are westerly, north westerly and north. He then lists the best sailors for these crossings, two sailors who are identified by their nick-names viz "Il-Mans" and "l-Imzejjen" senior.

Transport of Products

An interesting list of the fares payable for transport of products or commodities throw some light on possible traffic which constituted the commercial lifetime between the two islands.

Timber and wooden beams are charged 10 pence (or 6 *tari*) per trip. One hundred and ten *salme* of clover seeds drew a charge of £1-2s-11d and a court case ensued which finally ended with a charge of 1 *grano* 30 per *salma*. Another interesting list is that for land transport between Mgarr and Rabat. For instance a barrel of oil or wine is charged at 2 *tari* while a cask would be charged 12 *tari*.

For every *salma* of grain, beans etc. the charge is 5 *tari*. A bag of sugar 5 *tari*, for a bale of cotton 3 *tari*, for a bundle of tobacco from 4 to 5 *tari*, a container for chicken *grani* each. Chicken 5 *grani*, goat or sheep 2 *tari*. The agricultural nature of most traffic is obviously dominating the scene.

The Lighthouse at Ġordan

Occasionally one stumbles on to events or descriptions in the manuscript which throw considerable light, this time literally so, on life in or rather off Gozo. A case in point is the lighthouse at Ġordan, still a beacon for seafarers.

A short account of the installation of the light house at Tal-Ġordan gives certain interesting details. It was first used on the 15th October, 1853 and the first attendant was Publio Zammit from Floriana.

The lighthouse had 21 lights, seven on each of its three sides. The brass reflectors are plated with silver to give the best effect. Each reflector cost £21. He also speaks about the consumption of oil. This consumption is of between seven and eleven quarts a day according to the time and the quality of the oil. In all it almost consumes one hundred barrels a year. The light house openings have large glass faces which cost £2 each. The roof is made of iron while a lightning rod protects the whole tower. The light house is equipped with an alarm clock which sounds every four hours. The said clock is powered by weights.

The lighthouse is visible from 38 miles which makes it more powerful than the one at St. Elmo in Valletta which is only visible from 18 miles out at sea. On the same hill is the telegraph which at the time of writing (in 1859) was going to be transferred to Ras il-Wardiġa in the North of Gozo.

Ġgantija Temples

One outstanding monument in Gozo is the temple complex of Ġgantija which overawed the nineteenth century Gozitans as it does modern day residents and visitors alike. Our ubiquitous author did not fail to visit the place.

He describes the Ġgantija temples with the usual care which he does other sites. He also takes the trouble to make a rough sketch of the two temples.

He places these temples in the land belonging to Don Giuseppe Xerri of Xaghra whose nickname is “ta’ Žigzig”. He describes what he calls ‘the chapels’ and indicates a cross which is sculpted near the main apse of the first temple. He claims that the cross was made to commemorate the death at this place of Wenzu “ta’ Haniex” fifteen or sixteen years from the date of his visit which is on the 29th September, 1859.

During his visit he was told this by Domitilla “ta’ Dingkina” a widow who resided in those parts and who presumably used to show people around the temples. He also mentioned that in Xaghra there was a renowned palm tree which was planted in 1728 by Maria Grazia wife of Giacomo Hili. The said Grazia was the grandmother of Don Francesco Hili “ta’ Sebghu”

Gozitan Locations

The manuscript lists some of the larger villages and dedicated some space to a detailed description placing an emphasis on topography, physical geography and some lore.

A quick overview of some villages will give an idea of the details which the author recorded and particularly the names and nicknames as well as location of houses which only an on the spot visit could make possible. Starting with the village of Qala, he describes its frontiers so to speak. From Dahlet Qorrot by the sea to the street near Il-Ġebel il-Wieqaf. It is situated like a peninsula between Nadur and Ġhajnsielem from both of which it is separated by the street near il-Ġebel il-Wieqaf. He then

describes various places. For instance a place called Margra where there is a cross called *is-Salib ta' Margra* or *Magra*. There is also a spring of water and a garden called *il-Ġnien taz-Żebbuġ* which is rather large and planted with olive and orange trees. Along the street there is a canal through which water flows towards Tal-Wileġ passing through the said garden ending in the valley of Hondoq ir-Rummien.

He then describes the area near the old church of Qala dedicated to the Immaculate Conception built according to the author towards the year 1780 when the parish priest was Don Francesco Sapiano whose portrait was to be found in the sacristy. The author says that a statue where the church was erected was then placed in a niche on the facade.

An interesting description is that of the tiny island called *Il-Hagra Tal-Halfa*. This is sited beneath the Wileġ and is of an area of some 3 or 4 *mondelli*. From the part facing Gozo it is inaccessible because it is high and perpendicular but the side facing the open sea is in fact accessible. In summer it is used for pasture, the goats and sheep being transported by boat. He also mentions a military fort which is guarded by Maltese soldiers. This is presumably Garzes Tower which was eventually dismantled.

The certainty that the author relied on a personal visit to the places in question can be ascertained by a marginal note stating that he made a trip by horse drawn carriage at a rather slow pace from the Qala church to Rabat in Palm Street in an hour and twenty six minutes on the 4th October 1859.

The village of Għarb is claimed to be divided in several areas. These are: (1) Tal-Fgura; (2) Fuq il-Blata; (3) Santu Pietru; (4) Berbuba; (5) San Lawrenz; (6) Kap San Dimitri and (7) Ghammar.

He further spells out a reference to each site. Tal-Fgura, he tells us, is near the blacksmith's shop in the entrance to Għarb. Fuq il-Blata is near the house of the Cantore Caruana. The old church of Għarb is in Santu Pietru. Kap San Dimitri is in Berbuba. Beneath the church of Tal-Virtut there is the valley of Tal-Virtut with a plentiful spring of water where there is a public washing place. He lists the places on the road from Rabat to Għarb. From Triq ta' Wara s-Sur till right up to the stone village cross

Mid-Nineteenth Century Gozo



Early 19th century lithograph showing Mgarr Harbour, with Garzes Tower (right) and the road to Rabat (left). The lithograph (10.5 by 15.5 cm) was designed by Eduard de Montulé for Charles Brocas (c. 1821). From the collection of Dr. Albert Ganado.

at the centre of the village each street or site is identified such as Ghajn Tal-Hamimiet, Torri Cardona etc. The church he describes as having one bell tower with a clock.

He mentions the small church of San Dimitri with its altarpiece of St. Demetrius. He describes minutely the figure of the woman in the altarpiece. She is dressed in the *geżwira* and she is covered with the *culqana* in sky blue with white stripes. Near her is her son in chains. He says that she is the first woman buried in the new parish church of Gharb. Her residence, he claims, was in Cape San Dimitri. He visited the place on the 7th October, 1859 and found the house a pile of stones. The small church was built some 40 years prior to his visit in 1859 by the master mason Felice of Gharb.

Regarding Nadur, the author list again some territories such as Wied Xghajma, Mizieb ir -Rih or Ghajn Xriku. There is a place called Blata ta' Sigori where there is the rural home of Angelo Vella son of the late Michele "ta' Lip" or "ta' Prama" or "ta' Folti", a farmer from Nadur. In the

parish church there is preserved the body of the martyr St. Coronato whose feast is celebrated on the first Sunday of November. He believes that the name Dahlet Qorrot is derived from the name of a Turkish Commandant named Qorrot who landed once in that place. He mentions that in Ta' Hida there lives one called Blackhouse.

Żebbuġ is not too well described. He says that the parish church was built in the time of Parish Priest Francesco Vella when Alpheran was Bishop. In the said village there is a piece of land called Ta' Ċenċ overlooking Qbajjar Bay behind the lands Ta' Castelletti on the hill named Ta' Bram. On this land there is a spring. The land in question belongs to Don Salvatore Galea "ta' Piet" from the same village. In the limits of Żebbuġ there is a hill called Aveċċa where reputedly gold could be found. This was thoroughly prospected, says the author, but unfortunately gold was never found.

Perhaps the most detailed area of Gozo which is featured is that of Marsalforn. It has long been held, though this is not recognised by the Local Government Act 1993, that the valley Wied Riggū bisects the village into two sides, one appertaining to Xagħra and the other to Żebbuġ. The author seems to follow this tradition and in fact in the three descriptive pages he has written the description in two adjoining columns headed 'Limiti Casal Caccia' and 'Limiti Casal Żebbuġ'.

His detailed description with the name of each plot of land must be a source of interest not only to the students of geography but also to those of topography. He identifies sites by their owner. For instance, on the Xagħra side he describes the Habel ta' Marsalforn as touching the house of Magistrate Pace. Il-Bajja tal-Qittiena is a territory of 9 salme belonging to Count Sant while the lands tas-Sruġ belong to Camillo Sceberras.

On the Żebbuġ side there is Tal-Qormia near the house of Fr Axisa. Ta' Cassia, property of an officer of the Royal Malta Fencibles. Habel ta' Ċarrut or Ta' Parsott touching the walled garden of Dr. Mallia. Interestingly in this particular case he mingles Italian with Maltese possibly putting on paper what has been literally told him by a resident or a local. There is an entry regarding *Il-Barumbara* or the Battery of Friar Axisa, where there is the house of Dr. Mallia, of Ċikku Farrugia in front of the rooms of Calleja, Bondi', Ta' Brajgu.

Building in Stone

There is also a very interesting reference to the type of stone used for buildings. This time he also gives the source for this technical information. Master Painter Giuseppe Briffa "ta' Bertu" from Rabat who knows the area well informed the author that the best building stone was to be found in the lands Ta' Ċejla near that of Ta' Gonzales once owned by Dr Fenech of Rabat and later bought by Don Luigi Ascias known as "ta' Pixxet" from Żebbug. The land in question is in the limits of Żebbug at Il-Qbajjar. From this land was quarried stone for the construction of the house of Archpriest Cassar about 70 years prior to 1859 which house now belongs to Dr. Nicola Spiteri. The house, we are told, was therefore constructed well before the coming of the French in 1798.

The above descriptions are only a sample of what the manuscript contains. It is not possible to reproduce all that there is as otherwise it would occupy too much time. A closer look with comparative notes and cross references could perhaps occupy me in future.

Incidents

The manuscript contains a few examples of incidents which I came across in the very interesting pages of this wonderful manuscript.

There are various references to people accidentally drowning either in the sea or else in wells. For instance, on Sunday 4th August 1861 at about two in the afternoon at Qbajjar, two lads accidentally drowned. One was aged 15 years and called Giuseppe Sultana and the other Luigi Refalo 14 years old, both from Xaghra. Their funeral was held at the Xaghra parish church the next day where they were also buried. There is a note that Magistrate Carbone held an on the spot enquiry which lasted from the six till about midnight.

A similar incident is reported as having taken place much earlier that is on the 24th June 1803 when two ladies from Rabat nicknamed "ta' l-Alfier" aunts of the two priests Mercieca of Rabat of the same nickname. By a stroke of luck the mother of the two priests who was also swimming with her sisters was saved. The incident was witnessed by Notary Niçolo'

Tabone, the ex-Police Sergeant Calleja, the weigher Pačikk “ta’ Kurun” from Xaghra all quite young at the time. It is not unlikely that one of these eye witnesses recounted the story to the author after all these years.

Finally there is a very terse reference to a court case involving an old priest and a man with an eye glass. Don Michele Cassar “ta’ Skjazzu” from San Lawrenz who is always the deacon in the feasts celebrated at Gharb Parish Church and who is fairly old at the time of writing came across Stanislao Tortell who was looking at the church of Gharb through an eyeglass. Full of righteous indignation, he unhesitatingly attacked him with a stick, accusing him of magic!

Conclusion

The above descriptions are only a sample of what the manuscript contains. We have given only a cursory and fleeting look at this document. This, I believe, should whet the appetite of researchers for a more detailed analysis of the wealth of facts and figures revealed in the pages of this document. As it was not meant to be published it is written out in a form which is obviously meant for ease of reference. This has ensured a certain informal frankness in expression and reference to persons by name and in most cases by nickname. In fact at times in transcribing events or incidents I have felt as if I were figuratively looking over the shoulders of the author as he penned his notes.

The social history of Gozo as indeed that of Malta is crying out to be written. The published sources are scarce and it is therefore on documents such as the one thus traced today that social historians have to rely. No one knows exactly the amount of material, mostly in private hands, which would shed light on our social history. It is therefore necessary to make an appeal to all those who happen to have documents of this type to look after them and possibly to publish them so that scholars and all those interested in the past of our island could become familiar with them.