

New Light on the Archive of the Inquisition in Malta during French Rule 1798–1800

William Zammit

(Dept. of Library Information & Archive Sciences, Faculty of Media & Knowledge Sciences)

Originally published in: *60th Anniversary of the Malta Historical Society: A Commemoration* (J.F. Grima ed.), Malta: 2010, 275–94.

It is known that most of the major Maltese archival collections sustained losses of material or at least considerable disruption during the period of the French occupation of the Maltese islands, between 12 June 1798 and 5 September 1800. To a considerable extent, this was the result of a specific policy aimed to destroy and obliterate all memory of the old political and religious regime prevailing in pre-1798 Malta. Losses of archival material, however, also resulted, willingly or otherwise, from action on the part of the Maltese themselves both before but especially during the course of their rebellion against the French administration.¹ The bare facts as to how certain archives survived in a more or less complete form, while others sustained heavy losses indeed, are often more or less familiar to the historian. Much less is known about what has been irretrievably lost or dispersed and, conversely, about the stratagems used to save material from probable if not certain destruction.²

The almost 250-year old archive of the Holy Office in Malta could hardly fail to attract the almost immediate albeit undesired attention of a new regime which was anathema to all that the Inquisition stood for. Understandably, genuine feelings of fear and of hatred towards the Tribunal were also harboured by some of the local population, and this made the archive even more prone to destruction. Similar situations led to the loss of a vast inquisitorial archival patrimony throughout Catholic Europe during the same period: the archive of the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office itself was not spared and only a fraction of the original material is now traceable in the Congregation's own archive and in others which have managed to acquire some of the *Suprema*'s dispersed material.³ The archive of the Holy Office in Malta has, in comparison, survived to this day in a relatively complete condition,

¹ The Maltese insurgents thus destroyed archival material housed at the Notabile Law Courts; see G. Gatt, 'Gli archivi di Malta durante il periodo della occupazione francese e i primi anni della dominazione inglese', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, ix, 4, 1938, 414.

² For studies on historical aspects of Maltese archival collections, see A. Mifsud, 'Appunti sugli archivi di Malta', *Archivum Melitense*, ix, 1912-13, 9-67; Gatt, 411-28, *supra*; C. Farrugia, *L-Arkivji ta' Malta*, Malta 2006.

³ See J. Tedeschi, 'The Dispersed Archives of the Roman Inquisition', in G. Henningsen and J. Tedeschi, eds, *The Inquisition in Early Modern Europe. Studies on Sources and Methods* Northern Illinois University Press, 1986, 13-32. See also various studies in *L'Inquisizione Romana in Italia nell'Età Moderna: archivi, problemi di metodo e nuove ricerche. Atti del seminario internazionale, Trieste, 18-20 maggio 1988* Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato: Saggi 19, 1991. For a descriptive, albeit incomplete, listing of the Malta material available in the archive of the former Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office, now the *Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede* (ACDF), see A. Bonnici, 'Malta dai manoscritti della Stanza Storica dell'archivio della Congregazione della Fede', *Melita Historica*, xiii, 3, 2002, 229-38. For Malta material formerly part of the Supreme Congregation's archive and now at Trinity College, Dublin, see F. Ciappara, 'Maltese Inquisition Documents at Trinity College, Dublin', *The Sunday Times*, 13.2.2005, 45.

especially when one also considers the fact that many of its present lacunae are the result of losses sustained well before 1798.⁴ Since the archive's transfer from the bishop's palace to the cathedral museum archive and its subsequent organization, cataloguing and opening up for consultation some forty years ago, the archive of the Inquisition of Malta has constituted a major source of national and international importance where Maltese social history and the functioning of the Roman Inquisition in general are concerned.⁵

It has long been known that Ignazio Debono (1765-1819), the last chancellor of the tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta, was instrumental in ensuring the survival of the vast bulk of the inquisitorial archival material during the period 1798 to 1800.⁶ How this was achieved has, to date, remained unclear. It has been generally assumed that it was the chancellor's delaying tactics in handing over the Inquisitorial archive to the French administration that saved it from almost certain destruction, and that Debono managed to retain possession of the archive throughout French rule, following which he handed it over to the diocesan authorities.⁷ Newly-discovered documentation on the matter not only proves otherwise, but highlights the central role played by Bishop Vincenzo Labini (1735-1807).⁸ Indeed, the survival of the archive resulted from the efforts by these two, even if in conflict with each other over the issue, as well as through the sheer turn of events.⁹ Moreover, these fresh sources provide a detailed listing of the contents of the Inquisitorial archive between November 1798 and September 1799.

What follows here is a study of the new sources within the context of what has already been known. The documentation consists of material discovered in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and other in the Maltese Inquisitorial archive. The first comprises a series of letters between Bishop Labini and the Congregation of the Holy Office regarding the transfer of the Maltese Inquisitorial archives to Labini's residence, and is dated between September 1800 and February

⁴ The Archive of the Inquisition of Malta (AIM) itself abounds with references to such losses of material and attempts at preventing them and recuperating papers being taken out of the palace by Inquisitorial officials themselves. To give one example, AIM *Memorie* 26, ff. 3-4, Inquisitor Zondadari, dated 11.8.1777, 'Affine di occorrere al disordine, che suole accadere nelle Curie di trovarsi smarriti Processi, tanto decisi, come anche tal hor vertenti, e ciò con grave danno delle Parti. Incarichiamo il Nostro Cancelliere, che di oggi in avanti procure di fare tutte le diligenze, perche dalli Signori Avocati, Procuratori, parti, e qualsia altra Persona, che trovasi incaricati di Processi ricevuti, o da quest' Officio Civile del S. Officio, o della Reverenda Fabrica, si rimettano onninamente in quest' Officio infra il termine di giorni otto da computarsi dal di dell'esibizione'.

⁵ See various studies by A. Bonnici, C. Cassar and F. Ciappara, among others. On the international scene, major researchers, such as Andrea del Col, have utilised or referred to AIM material. See A. del Col, *L'Inquisizione in Italia dal XII al XXI secolo*, Oscar Mondadori 2006, *passim*.

⁶ For a short biography of Debono, see V. Griffiths, as quoted below, 69.

⁷ Thus A. Bonnici, *Medieval and Roman Inquisition in Malta*, Malta, 1998, 296, 'In 1814, when a new era of colonial rule by Britain had dawned in Malta, [Ignazio] Debono handed over *all* [my italics] the Inquisition documents to Mgr Ferdinando Mattei, the Bishop of Malta'. On the 1814 donation of Inquisitorial documents to Mattei, see below.

⁸ For a biography of Bishop Labini, see M. Galea, *The Life and Times of Vincenzo Labini, Bishop of Malta*, Malta 1980.

⁹ Mifsud, 67 had already briefly referred to the role of both Debono and Labini in rescuing the Inquisitorial archive from probable destruction. Mifsud, however, did not give his sources in this case. Labini's role was more or less ignored by subsequent historians and Debono gradually was credited with having saved the archive single-handedly.

1801.¹⁰ The second source is a detailed and dated list of the material which Debono passed over to Labini in batches, between 27 November 1798 and 27 September 1799.¹¹

The first letter sent by Bishop Labini to the Congregation of the Holy Office was dated 10 September 1800, just a few days following the capitulation of the French Republican forces blockaded on the island.¹² Labini recounts how, upon the occupation of the Maltese islands by the French, he became seriously concerned as to the fate of the archive pertaining to the suppressed Inquisitorial tribunal, particularly since material from it could, at that point, be easily made public, if not indeed published, in order to expose the Catholic religion and its priesthood to contempt. Labini was especially worried about documentation pertaining to cases of alleged priestly solicitation during confession, particularly those cases of more recent vintage and which would naturally expose members of the clergy who were still alive. Upon discussing the situation with his theologians and with almost all the former consultants of the Maltese Inquisitorial tribunal, the bishop was unanimously advised to have all papers relating to recent cases of solicitation during confession burned and to have the rest of the Inquisitorial archive transferred to the relative safety of his palace, situated in Valletta. While no date is provided as to when these decisions were taken, it is plausible to assume that the advice was given only a few days, or at the most weeks, following the French takeover and prior to any instructions being issued by the new administration regarding the archive. Labini concurred with the advice given and fervently insisted with the last assessor and chancellor of the tribunal, namely Canon Giovanni Battista Gatt and Reverend Ignazio Debono respectively, for the proposed measures to be carried out immediately.¹³

In his letter Labini proceeded to inform the *Suprema* that, while the destruction of the recent cases of solicitation was indeed carried out, both Gatt and Debono strongly opposed the request for the transfer of the rest of the archive to the episcopal residence. The reference to the wilful destruction of Inquisitorial documents by the local ecclesiastical establishment itself – though suspected – has never before been actually documented. That such destruction took place is further confirmed by the gaps in the surviving archival material. Thus, while for the decades between 1700 and 1769 the surviving cases of alleged solicitation during confession average sixteen cases per decade, for the decades 1770 to 1798 this goes down to just one case. A volume listing persons imprisoned by the Inquisition between 1757 and 1798 lists two priests who were condemned as late as 25 April and 15 May 1798 respectively, although the cases might have had nothing to do with solicitation during confession.¹⁴

¹⁰ ACDF St. St. Hh-5-d, unfoliated, reproduced as Documents 1 to 5 in the Appendix, below. A word of appreciation is here due to Mgr Alejandro Cifres and to his dedicated staff at the ACDF archive, Vatican State.

¹¹ AIM Civ. 580, unfoliated, reproduced as Document 6 in the Appendix, below.

¹² Labini's letter was addressed to the Cardinal Secretary of the Congregation of the Holy Office, with a copy sent to the Assessor of the Congregation; cf. Document 1 in Appendix, below.

¹³ According to the transcription of the Debono letter to Carpegna (see fn. 16, below), Gatt had also been appointed Pro-Inquisitor by the last Inquisitor, Mgr Carpegna, prior to the latter leaving the island on 26 May. In a letter to the government of the Roman Republic, dated 26 April 1798, Carpegna also refers to Gatt as Pro-Inquisitor; see A. Bonnici, *Storja ta' l-Inkizizzjoni ta' Malta*, vol. III, Malta 1994, 533.

¹⁴ This manuscript bears the title 'Carcerazioni' and is referred to by Bonnici 1994, 541. Bonnici states that the volume, originally forming part of the Inquisitorial archive, is in a private collection. For a typescript copy of this manuscript, see AIM Repertories: *Processi*: Box 6.

Also indicative is the number of cases which are presently missing: while for the period 1700-79 the number of missing cases per decade averages seven, that for 1780-98 goes up to seventeen.¹⁵

The strong resistance to Labini's other request is understandable: the Inquisitorial assessor and chancellor were, among other, duty-bound to guard the archive of what, until just a short time before, had been one of the three major authorities on the island and which was often in conflict with the other two. Not only did the archive contain thousands of trials and denunciations of both a religious and civil nature: it moreover comprised centuries of correspondence with the Congregation of the Holy Office and with the Papal Secretariat of State. It also preserved sensitive material on disputes with the local diocesan establishment. Labini's request, even if motivated only by the sudden and alarming political change hitting the island, could therefore hardly be expected to receive prompt acquiescence by the two most senior Inquisitorial officials left on the island. Even in such a dark reality, one in which Pope Pius VI himself was a French prisoner and all the Roman Congregations had been suspended by the French Republican forces occupying Rome, a lingering hope that all might not yet be over and that the Inquisition might one day be re-established on the island, must have added to the two officials' dilemma in their particularly difficult predicament. It is also known that Debono had received a letter from the last Inquisitor of Malta, Mgr Carpegna, dated 28 June 1798. While as yet untraced, this document might very well have contained instructions to Debono, including ones relating to the archive. What is certain is that Debono felt obliged to keep a record of what was going on in the island with the intention of sending it to Carpegna by way of reply. It was only towards the end of September 1800 that Debono was finally in a position to reply to Carpegna's letter by sending him a detailed account of what had taken place.¹⁶

The survival of the Inquisitorial archive started to be seriously compromised when, on 11 July 1798, the French Government Commission discussed a request submitted on behalf of a number of unidentified citizens by the Municipality of the East, which comprised the Cottonera area, asking for the criminal proceedings within the archive to be burned. The Commission took note of the request, without however deciding on the matter.¹⁷ Meanwhile, it seems that, notwithstanding the fact that seals had been put on the entrances to the archive, a doorway had been forced open and archival material was taken out and ended up freely circulating in public.¹⁸ The Inquisitor's palace had, upon the French takeover, been assigned to a French commander. At the

¹⁵ W. Zammit, 'The Dissemination of Unorthodoxy and New ideas in Malta, 1700-1798', unpub. PhD. thesis, University of Malta 2001, vol. 2, Table I. The surviving cases of alleged priestly solicitation during confession amount to three for the decade 1770-79, one for 1780-89 and no cases at all for the period 1790-98.

¹⁶ Griffiths, V.G., 'A Letter to Inquisitor Monsignor Carpegna comprising a "Diary" account of events of the French Occupation (1798-1800)', in W. Zammit (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1999*, Malta 2002, 67-96. The document, which is in the possession of Griffiths, is a copy of a copy which was originally in the collection of Giuseppe Darmanin Demajo. Debono starts by referring to the letter reaching him from Carpegna, without however, disclosing anything about its contents.

¹⁷ AOM 6524B, 'Lettres écrites par la Commission de Gouvernement', p. 50. This document is reproduced in H.P. Scicluna, *Actes et Documents relatifs à l'histoire de l'Occupation Française de Malte 1798-1800, et à la Fête du 14 Juillet 1798 à Malte*, Third Edition, Malta 1979, 180-1.

¹⁸ Labini's letter, dated 10.9.1800; cf. Document 1 in Appendix, below. The reference to seals being placed at the entrances of the Inquisitorial archives is given by Mifsud, without however, giving its source, and no mention of such seals is made in Labini's correspondence or in any other contemporary documentation.

entrance, a bodyguard was billeted, while a certain Vincenzo and Michele were employed as a cook and a butler respectively.¹⁹

On 20 July 1798, while the French Government Commission was still considering the request for the burning of the Inquisitorial criminal proceedings, the re-organisation of the judiciary was announced. Article X stated that all documents, acts and other records of proceedings belonging to the suppressed courts, comprising those of the Inquisitor and the Bishop, were to be transferred to a general depository which was to be set up in one of the halls in the palace of the French Government Commission, formerly the Grand Master's palace. An archivist was appointed in the person of the aged Gaetano Bonavita, an ardent French supporter. The other archival material which did not consist of records of court proceedings (such as correspondence and accounts) was, by default, exempt from being deposited in the new institution. Equally crucial was that the new instructions also requested those currently responsible for the archives of the suppressed tribunals to remain at their post, with the responsibility of separating the concluded cases from the current ones.²⁰ In execution of these stipulations, on 26 July the French Government Commission requested Bishop Labini and Giovanni Battista Gatt, the latter in his position as assessor to the suppressed Inquisitorial tribunal, to comply by handing over the specified archival material in their custody.²¹ Thus it seems that between late July and late October 1798, a portion of the Inquisitorial archive must have been transferred from the former Inquisitor's palace to Gatt's residence so that the latter could comply to the government's instructions. It is clear that the Inquisitorial archival material was not transported directly to the newly-established general state archival depository, but to Gatt's residence. This is confirmed by the payment receipt issued to Bonavita for the transport of the archival material, as well as by Labini's letter which stated that papers were to be seen stewn all over Gatt's house, since the latter was in the process of identifying the civil proceedings as these were to be handed over to Bonavita.²² On 25 October 1798, the French Government Commission provisionally suspended the transfer of the archival material due to financial considerations resulting from the outbreak of the Maltese rebellion.²³ Thus the first batch of Inquisitorial material was transported from the former Inquisitor's palace to Gatt's residence between late July and late October 1798.

Both the lack of reference to non-judicial archival material, as well as the retention of the previous archivists allowed room for manoeuvre and some breathing space which could – and was indeed availed of – to avoid having the Inquisition's archive either destroyed or else handed *in toto* to the anti-clerical French administration. In the latter case it was patently clear that the material not deemed to be of current utility would end up being made publicly accessible, used for the manufacture of cartridges or simply burnt. The fate of the archive of the Order of St John must have made this

¹⁹ Debono in Griffiths, 73, describes Vincenzo and Michele as 'due famosi birbi'. Both were probably French sympathisers, with Michele being described by Debono as being a relative of the staunchly pro-French Vincenzo Barbara.

²⁰ *Instructions pour les Tribunaux Civils et Criminels, et pour les Judges de Paix*, undated printed sheet Malta c. 20.7.1798. Bonavita is referred to as 'Ignace' in some French documents and 'Cajetan' in others; cf. Scicluna, 184. His real name was Gaetano; cf. C. Testa, *The French in Malta (1798–1800)*, Malta 1997, 196.

²¹ Document reproduced in Scicluna, 183-4.

²² Document 1 in Appendix, below.

²³ *Ibid*, 185.

painfully clear to both Labini and the Inquisitorial officials. The Maltese Gaetano Bruno, responsible for the Order's archive, had, on the previous day, been instructed to deposit archival material which concerned issues relating to property in the newly-established archive, while the rest was to be considered as useless. A quantity of this material ended up destroyed or sold off by weight to third parties.²⁴ When Menard, the Commissary for the Navy, asked the French Government Commission to utilise the large amount of paper and parchment documents found in the Auberge d'Auvergne for the production of cartridges, his request was granted.²⁵

The transport of part of the archive to Assessor Gatt's residence between late July and late October 1798 must have made the material accessible to Ignazio Debono who, in turn, started passing parts of it to the bishop.²⁶ It was indeed at this point that Labini overrode the Maltese Inquisitorial officials' qualms on the matter, and ordered the transport of Inquisitorial archival material from Gatt's residence to his palace. Whether this move was done with the tacit consent of the French authorities or not is not clear; it must certainly have been difficult to conceal the transport of such material to the bishop's palace on so many occasions. Not only did the bishop pay the transport costs, but he also had a specific area within his palace set for the keeping of the archive. The material was kept securely locked up in cupboards, the keys to which were held by the bishop himself.

Between 27 November and 29 December 1798 Debono – on at least sixteen different occasions – delivered to the bishop the Inquisitorial *Memorie*, the correspondence to and from the Papal Secretariat of State and the various Roman Congregations, notably that of the Holy Office, and criminal proceedings. The latter consisted of proceedings held under Inquisitors Domenico Cubelles (1561-6) to Galeazzo Marescotti (1663-6). Other criminal proceedings of the same Inquisitors were, however, delivered during 1799. The number of proceedings of each respective Inquisitor that were handed over were listed by Debono and this enables a comparison between the material handed over to the bishop during 1798-99 and that which is presently available within the archive.

The transfer of the rest of the archive from the former Inquisitor's palace to Gatt's house was resumed between late June and mid August 1799. Thus, on 28 June 1799 Noblot, the French Commander of the Eastern Municipality which comprised Cottonera, was requested by the French Government Commission to ensure the safety of the Inquisitorial archive which was still housed in the former Inquisitor's palace, where he was residing. Noblot was also informed that Bonavita had been instructed to

²⁴ For the original documentation regarding the fate of the Archive of the Order during French rule, see Scicluna, 180-2, 185-6. On 30 March 1799 the assistant director of artillery was permitted to utilise all the useless papers from the archive, presumably for the manufacture of cartridges. In 1801 Civil Commissioner Alexander Ball requested a certain Giovanni Battista Galea, a merchant from Valletta, to return the registers and papers pertaining to the Order's archive which he had obtained from the French authorities in exchange for foodstuffs. The amount of such material sold off may be gauged by the fact that Galea returned registers, paper and parchment weighing a total of 16 *cantari* and 5 *rotoli*; Gatt, 413, 419-20.

²⁵ Scicluna, 183.

²⁶ Document 6 in Appendix, below. This important document was not kept within any of the AIM volumes and it was not listed in any way and so, even though I knew of its existence, I could not trace it. I am grateful to Mr Mario Gauci, Assistant Archivist at the Cathedral Archives, for tracing this document for me, and which has now been placed in AIM Civ. 580.

carry out the transfer of the archive. This is confirmed by the payment of 8 *scudi*, 5 *tari* and 15 *grani* issued to Bonavita on 14 August for the removal of the archive from the palace to the residence of the former Inquisitorial assessor, Gatt.²⁷

This second transfer in turn made possible the resumption of Debono's own handing over of material to Labini, which took place between 1 August and 27 September 1799 on some ten separate occasions. Criminal proceedings of the later Inquisitors, mostly from Inquisitor Vidoni down to Carpegna, but also including that pertaining to previous ones, were handed over. Other material comprised cases against members of the Order, volumes of correspondence, an account of Mgr Pietro Dusina's visit of 1575 and other matter of a miscellaneous nature.²⁸ Debono's acquiescence to Labini's instructions seems to have remained a reluctant one, since he himself records having sharp exchanges with the bishop over the matter.²⁹

Following the last delivery of material to Labini on 27 September 1799, Debono stated in writing that he had delivered all Inquisitorial documentation to the bishop, with the exception of the voluminous civil proceedings and the papers pertaining to the *Reverenda Fabrica di San Pietro* which he held in his possession.³⁰ Labini, however, now demanded the handing over of civil proceedings and the *Fabrica* documentation as well. This time Debono countered Labini's request by stating that such documentation was safe from the French, since he was feigning sickness and would thus not hand it over to the authorities if he was requested to do so. When Labini pressed the matter, Debono countered by stating that his movements were guarded and was thus impossible for him to hand over the material to the bishop.³¹

In its reply to Labini's letter of 10 September 1800, the Congregation of the Holy Office not only approved Labini's conduct on the matter, but also asked the bishop to take care of the financial interests of the Holy Office in Malta. Moreover, the bishop was also to assume jurisdiction over all spiritual matters previously falling under that of the defunct Inquisitorial tribunal. The Congregation described as unjust any action taken by the assessor, chancellor or any other official of the suppressed tribunal with regards to the latter since the diocese had a bishop who could so ably handle such affairs.³²

²⁷ Ibid, 186.

²⁸ Document 6 in Appendix, below.

²⁹ Debono in Griffiths, 77, 'Io ebbi a dire più volte con Monsignore Vescovo sull'Archivio Criminale, e l'Archivio del' [sic] Inquisitore'. This comment was written between others dated end of September and 29 October 1799 respectively. The 'Archivio dell'Inquisitore' refers mainly to the Inquisitorial correspondence and *memorie*.

³⁰ Document 7 in Appendix, below.

³¹ Debono in Griffiths, 79, 'Ieri il Vescovo mi chiamò e mi disse, che vuole l'Archivio della Reverenda Fabrica o' siano gli Atti Civili: ma io gli risposi: non consegnai alcun carta alla Repubblica perche mi finì di esser malato, e Vostra Signoria Illustrissima vuole il detto Archivio. Allora mi rispose: dite che sta da me in caso che sarete ricercato, allora io gli risposi: Il Signor Iddio mi liberò da quando io ebbi la spia che stavo per uscire carte per consegnare a V.S. e non mi fecero niente, anzi passò l'affare sotto banca, questo abbasta per mio regolamento e su questo il Vescovo l'ha contro di me'. This episode, which again is not specifically dated, features towards the end of 1799 in Debono's account to Carpegna.

³² Documents 2 and 3 in Appendix, below.

Labini's attempt at complying with the Congregation's request regarding the financial matters of the defunct tribunal was nipped in the bud by General Henry Pigot who was in control of the islands. Pigot unequivocally informed Labini in writing that while all the rights of the Maltese Church were guaranteed, no Inquisitorial power emanating from Rome, nor any other ecclesiastical authority pertaining to any foreign sovereign could be recognised. Pigot's stance constitutes a very early official statement on the part of the British authorities administering Malta regarding the inadmissibility of re-establishing the Roman Inquisition on the island. It is moreover a revealing document that clearly states the British attitude towards the Church in Malta at the start of the British Protectorate and subsequent rule.³³

Notwithstanding the transfer of Inquisitorial archival material to the bishop's residence, some of the material may have ended up in the central archival repository created by the French administration, since only days after the French capitulation, the Maltese Church formally petitioned the new government for its return. The request referred to the return of all the civil proceedings together with other material from the bishop's archive as well as papers from the archive of the Inquisition.³⁴ Possibly Debono was, sometime after December 1799, forced to hand over at least part of the material he retained in his possession, namely the Inquisitorial civil proceedings and the *Reverenda Fabrica* material. Other manuscript writings pertaining to the Inquisition ended up as part of the National Library of Malta collection. Such manuscript material, however, may have been housed in the Inquisitorial library and was transported with the books when this transfer was carried out.³⁵ The fact that archival material originally pertaining to the Order of St John, notably 72 volumes of documentation pertaining to the spoils of members of the Order between 1549 and 1772, ended up as an addenda to the Inquisitorial archive seems to have resulted inadvertently during the process of returning the material to the ecclesiastical authorities.³⁶

It is known that Debono did retain documentation from the Inquisitorial archive down to 1814. In that year, he donated the material to Bishop Ferdinando Mattei, Labini's successor. In appreciation, the bishop awarded Debono a pension for life. Whether the material passed over to the bishop in 1814 consisted exclusively of the civil proceedings and the *Reverenda Fabrica* registers, or whether it comprised other

³³ Document 5 in Appendix, below. Pigot's communication to Labini, while not outrightly contradictory, contrasts with that made public by his successor, Charles Cameron, in the latter's public declaration *Alla Nazione Maltese*, issued on 15 July of that same year and printed in Malta as a broadsheet. In it, Cameron declared that: 'Sua Maestà ... proteggerà le vostre Chiese, la vostra Santa Religione ...'.

³⁴ See Document 7 in Appendix, below. Griffiths, 69, refers to 'a detailed list of the documents that Debono did not deliver to the Bishop'. This list was, according to Griffiths, discovered in the Archives of the Cathedral Museum by Mgr John Azzopardi, but no reference to it could be provided. It may well be that the 'list' referred to is actually the Debono document being reproduced hereunder.

³⁵ On the transfer of the Inquisitorial library to the Public Library in 1798, see NLM Libr. Ms. 527, f. 3r-v. The vicissitudes of the Inquisitorial library following the French conquest of Malta deserves a short study on its own.

³⁶ The petition submitted by the ecclesiastical court to the civil government is undated, but its acceptance is dated 19 September 1800. The petition is here being reproduced from Gatt, 426–7; cf. Document 7 in Appendix, below. For a description of the volumes of the spoils, see G. Galea, *An Inventory of the Manuscript Volumes of the "Spoils" (1549–1772) Preserved in the Archives at the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta* Malta, 1988.

documents which Debono had refrained from handing over to Labini, is as yet unclear.³⁷ Doubtless, however, the vast bulk of the Maltese Inquisitorial tribunal's most revealing documents: the criminal proceedings, the correspondence and the *memorie*, had been transferred to the bishop's residence for safekeeping during the uncertain months of 1798 and 1799.

Appendix **Documentation regarding the Archive of the Inquisition in Malta** **1798–1800**

Document 1

Letter sent by Bishop of Malta Vincenzo Labini to the Cardinal Secretary of the Congregation of the Holy Office, dated 10 September 1800

Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signore Signore e Padrone Colendissimo

[f. 1] Fra i guai accaduti in quest'Isola per essere caduta nelle mani dei francesi nel Giugno del 1798, quello fra gli altri mi ha recata non poca inquietudine, ed ha esatta la mia sollecita vigilanza, il vedere cioè da essi occupato il Palazzo che abitava Mons. Inquisitore, dove vi erano gli Archivj ripieni di carte di non poca importanza. Riflettendo che gli inimici di nostra S. Religione li quali in gran numero abbondavano fra di loro, avrebbero potuto fare di esse un uso di molto danno per la medesima col divulgare, e forse anche colle stampe per maligno astioso animo le Cause di sollecitazione ad turpia, e principalmente di persone ancor viventi con manifesto pericolo di gravissimi scandali, di venire esposta a disprezzi il S. Sacramento della Penitenza, e di risse e vendetta delle persone che resterebbero intaccate nell'onore, ho voluto sentire il parer de' nostri Teologi, e principalmente di quasi tutti li Consul- [f. 1v] tori di questa S. Inquisizione su ciò che convenisse di fare in circostanze così pericolose. Questi sono stati di unanimo parere che bisognava far bruciare senza perder tempo le carte appartenenti a sollecitazioni moderne, e di custodire per quanto fosse possibile le altre carte consistenti in molti grossi volume nel Palazzo di mia abitazione, come luogo, che sebbene non totalmente sicuro, riscuoteva nondimeno qualche particolare riguardo. Il loro parer mi sembro molto prudente, e perciò ne raccomandai caldamente l'esecuzione all'Assessore ed al Cancelliere di questo S. Ufficio. L'abbruciamento delle accennate carte non incontro molta difficoltà, ma non così accade rispettivamente al trasporto de libri al mio Palazzo, perchè si opposero gagliardamente li detti Assessore e Cancelliere, e voglio credere con buona intenzione. Ma considerando io, che il pericolo sempre più cresceva, e che da un momento all'altro potea nascere ne Francesi la prava volonta di esaminare quelle carte, principalmente se fossero stati fomantati [f. 2] com'era da temersi da qualche

³⁷ On the 1814 donation, see A.P. Vella, *The Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta*, 2nd impression, 1973, 43, 'The Rev. Ignatius Debono, the assessor [sic] of the Inquisition, succeeded in delaying the transfer of the registers and most of them remained in his possession. In 1814 Debono presented them to the Bishop of Malta and as compensation he received an annual pension from the Curia. Vella does not give the sources to this reference and, while it has been referred to by subsequent researchers, the original document as yet remains to be traced.

Maltese quanto ad essi amico altrettanto nemico del S. Ufficio e della S. Fede, ed avendo con certezza saputo che già era stata forzata e rotta una porta segreta del detto archivio, onde vedeani nel pubblico alcuni carte ad esso spettanti, e che finalmente dopo qualche tempo avendo voluto li francesi che si strapasse il medesimo Archivio, erano stato portate le carte nella casa dell'Assessore, dove vedeani sparse per le stanze sotto il pretesto, che voglio credere sincero, di separare li Processi civili, che doveansi consegnare al pubblico Archivio secondo l'ordine del Governo, sono stato nella necessità di credere essere mio obbligo indispensabile il cambiare condotta, e di passare dalle dolci insinuazioni ai forti e precisi ordini di non più fare opposizione al trasporto delle ridette carte al Palazzo Vescovile, come si esegui a mie spese. Ho fatto ancora a mie spese apparecchiare luogo conveniente con armadi forniti di buone serrature, le di cui chiavi sono da me medesimo custodite con vigilanza. Tutto ciò ho creduto mio indispensabile dovere nelle luttuose circostanze in cui si siamo ritrovati, perchè non ho stimato che eravi in [f. 2v] quest' Isola persona più del Vescovo obbligata ad impedire per quanto gli fosse stato possibile gli scandali, a difendere la Fede dagli oltraggi ed a promuoverne la venerazione e l'ossequio.

Spero intanto, che il mio operato sara approvato da V.E. da cui implore gli ordini opportuni nel nuovo presente nostro stato rispetto alle medesime carte, che sono nelle mie mani alla prima sua disposizione, e rispetto ad ogni altra cosa, in cui si degnerà darmi l'onore di qualche suo ambito comando, col più profondo rispetto passo a baciare il limbo della S. Porpora, ed a raffermarmi

Di V.E. Rev.

Malta 10 7mbre 1800

Card. Segretario
Congregazione del Sant' Ufficio

Umil., e Dev. Servid. vero
F.V. Arc.o Vesc.o di Malta

Source: ACDF St. St. Hh-5-d (unfoliated)

Document 2

The Cardinal Secretary's reaction to Labini's letter as communicated to the Assessor of the Holy Office, dated 19 November 1800

Casa 19. Nov. 1800

[f. 1] Ritorna il Card. Antonelli a V.S. Illma. la lettera di Mons Vescovo di Malta, alla quale potra risponderi con lodare, ed approvar pienamente tutto quello, ch'è stato da lui fatto per la conservazione delle carte spettanti al S.O., pregandolo altresì di continuare a ritenerle presso di se sino di nuovo ordine della S. Congregazione. Gli si potrebbe anche ingiungere di prendersi il pensiero, e la cura degl'interessi economici del S.O., dandoglisi a tal effetto ogni autorità in nome della stessa Congregazione. Non è giusto, che l'Assessore, [f. 1v] il Cancelliere, e altri ministri subalterni prendano ingerenze sugl'interessi temporali del S.O, quando vi è un Vescovo così degno e zelante, come lo è veramente quello di Malta. Sulle materie poi rituali mancando ora l'Inquisizione, compete già al Vescovo, come ordinario, ogni

giurisdizione. E qui il cardinale scrivente colla più distinta stima bacia a V.S. Illma. di vero cuore le mani.

P.S. Essendo stata la lettera di Mons. Vescovo diretta al Card. Segretario, farà conveniente, che la risposta gli si faccia a nome suo per sottoscrivere anche da lui.

Source: ASDF St.St. Hh-5-d (unfoliated)

Document 3

The Holy Office's official reply to Labini's letter of 10 September 1800, dated 25 November 1800

[f. 1] Malta = Mgr Arciv.o Vesc.o
25 Nov. 1800

Ho ricevuto la pregiatissima Lettera di V.S. Illma. e Rma. in data dei 10 del passato Settembre, e mi son fatto un dovere di passare l'altra sua al Sig. Cardinale Antonelli, il quale da pochi giorni è stato dichiarato Segretario della Sagra Congregazione dalla Santità di N.S. Dalla di lui risposta rileverà quali siano i sentimenti della S. Congregazione rapporto agli oggetti da lei indicate alli quali io mi riporto intieramente. Io non posso che ammirare il di Lei zelo, e commendare la sua attività e risolutezza mostrata particolarmente nella conservazione delle Carte del S. Offizio. Gradisca V.S. Illma. e Rma. anche i miei ringraziamenti che gliene porgo, ed ambizioso di avere incontri per servirla con piena stima e rispetto mi rassegno

[ff. 1v-2: blank. On f. 2v:] Malta. Relazione sulle affari e carte del S. Offizio in tempo dell'occupazione fatta dai Francesi

[followed by the Cardinal Secretary of State's reply to Labini]

[f. 1] Malta = Arciv.o Vescvo 25 Novembre 1800.

Non sarà mai abbastanza commendato lo sperimentato zelo ed attività da V.S. mostrato in tutte le di Lei operazioni indicate nella sua dei 10 del passato Settembre, ma specialmente in quella di avere conserato le Carte interessanti del Sant'Officio. Non può quindi questa S. Congregazione dispensarsi da contestarlene la sua viva riconoscenza, e renderlene i suoi sinceri ringraziamenti, pregandola altresì di continuare a ritenere presso di se le dette carte sino a nuovo Ordine della medesima.

Circa le materie spirituali di pertinenza del S. Officio, mancando costì il ministro solito ad avere l'autorità delegate di questa Suprema nonva dubbio che debba V.S. supplier coll'ordinarie sue facoltà a tutto l'occorrente secondo quelle vedute che la sua [f.1v] prudenza saprà presentarle. Crede inoltre espediente l'istessa S. Congregazione nelle presenti circostanze, ch'Ella si compiaccia di prendersi il pensiero, e la Cura degl'interessi economici di codesto S. Officio, al qual effetto le conferisce tutte le facoltà necessarie e opportune nella persuasione che sarà Ella per procurarne il migliore essere, dandone poi contezza a questa Suprema. Tanto ho l'onore di parteciparle nell'atto che con piena stima &

[attached folio: blank]

Source: ASDF St.St. Hh-5-d

Document 4

Letter sent by Bishop Labini to the Cardinal Secretary of the Congregation of the Holy Office, dated 14 February 1801

Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Signore Signore e Padrone Colendissimo

[f. 1] Sono oltremodo sensibile al gradimento che l'E.V. e cotesta Suprema Congregazione del S. Ufficio si sono compiaciute manifestarmi per quant io mi trovo aver operato nelle passate critiche circostanze, relativamente alle Carte interessanti, che esistevano in questo Palazzo Inquisitoriale: nel che non riconosco di aver fatto altro, che semplicemente adempire le parti del mio dovere. E quindi rispetto della sperimentata parzialissima bontà di V.E. per me gli obbliganti Uffici che la prelodata Suprema Congregazione si è degnata passarmi colla Sua [f. 1v] pregiatissima del dì 25 Novembre dello scorso anno 1800, la quale non prima del dì 3 del corrente febbrajo mi è stata recapitata.

Rapporto agl'interessi economici di questo S. Ufficio, non posso com'ora dare alcuna contezza all'E.V. ed a cotesta Suprema, perchè attendo i necessari lumi, e rischiarimenti da questo Assessore Dr D. Gio. Batta Gatt, e che per motivo dell'attuale di lui infermità, non è ancor in istato di mettermi a giorno delle cose, per poter io prendere quelle misure che giudicherei [f. 2] proprie ed espedienti nel fatto. Mi farò peraltro un pensiero particolare di eseguire esattamente la mente dell'E.V., e di codesta Suprema, se l'attuale posizione e sistema del Paese me lo permetteranno.

In attestato del mio doveroso attaccamento alla Santa sede Apostolica, alla Suprema Congregazione d all'E.V. di cui baciando la Sac. Porpora passo colla dovuta venerazione a rassegnarmi

Di V.E. Revma.

Malta 14 Febbraio 1801

L'Emo. E Revmo. Sig. Card. Antonelli
Segretario della S. Suprema Romana Inquisizione
Roma

Umil. E Dev. Ser. Servo Oblig.
F.V. Arch. Vesc. Di Malta

[on f. 2v:] Malta Feria 4 die 15 Aprilis 1801 [followed by a note by the Holy Office Assessor, A. Malvasia, containing instructions for Bishop Labini to write to Civil Commissioner Pigot].

Source: ACDF St.St. 5-d

Document 5

Letter sent by Bishop Labini to the Cardinal Secretary of the Congregation of the Holy Office, dated 15 February 1801

[f. 1] Dopo avere io chiusa l'antecedente mi[a] divotissima, che ho l'onore di rimettere con questa stessa opportuna occasione del Sig. Cavalier Commendator Bari [?] all' E.V., ho ricevuta la risposta dell'attuale nostro Sig. Generale e Governatore Pigot, ad un mio biglietto, di cui, siccome pure della sudetta risposta, acchiudo copia all'E.V. Ella rileverà facilmente da tale risposta quanto poco posso io sperare di riuscire nell'onorevole incarico che l'E.V. e codesta Suprema Congregazione del S. Ufficio si sono degnate commettermi intorno agli affari economici di questa S. Inquisizione di Malta. [f. 1v] Io nondimeno adempisco parte del mio dovere con darne tale contezza all'E.V., ed alla predetta Suprema Congregazione, pregandole nello stesso tempo di darmene le opportune istruzioni del come dovrò condurmi in simili circostanze; e protestando costantemente la mia pronta ubidienza a quanto dalle Medesime mi verrà sapientemente suggerito, e baciando divotamente la Sacra Porpora dell'E.V. con ogni dovuta venerazione passo a rassegnarmi

Di V. Emza. Revma.
All'Emo. e Revmo. Sig. Card. Antonelli
Seg.o. Della Sta. Supr. Inquisizione
Roma

Malta 15 febbraio 1801
Umil. E Dev. Serv. Ser. Oblig.
F. V. Arch. Vesc. Di Malta

[inserted with the letter is the following:]

Copia del Biglietto del Vescovo, al Sig Generale e Governatore di Malta Pigot.
Dal Palazzo vescovile 14. Febbraio 1801

L'Arcivescovo vescovo di Malta, si da l'onore di ossequiare S. Eccza. Il Sig. Generale e Governatore Pigot, e di pregarlo di mettergli in iscritto i sentimenti comunicatigli a voce, relativo agli Ordini e Carte del Tribunale della Monarchia di Sicilia per questa Diocesi: sicuro de suoi favori, che serviranno per sua regola e quiete, colla dovuta venerazione si rassegna di Lui Devmo. Ed Obbligo. Serv. Vero.

Copia della risposta del Sig. Generale e Governatore Pigot, al sudetto Biglietto del Vescovo

Illmo. e Revmo. Monsignor

In risposta alla pregiatissima sua, mi dò l'onore di significare a V.S. Illma. E Revma., che sono stato instruito di dire, che tutti i dritti, privilegi, immunità di Chiesa, e di Stato, sono riconfermate al Popolo Maltese.

Il Vescovo di Malta è il Capo della Chiesa Maltese. Niun Potere Inquisitoriale emanabile dalla Sede di Roma, può essere ammesso.

E niun altra Autorità Ecclesiastica di qualunque altro Sovrano potrà essere riconosciuta.

Compito con il mio incarico, mi dichiaro con ogni stima

Di V.S. Illma. e Revma.

Mons Arcivescovo

14 Febbraro 1801

Umo. e Devmo. Servo

[verso and the attached folio: blank]

Source: ACDF St.St Hh-5-d

Document 6

Description of Inquisitorial registers and criminal proceedings passed by Ignazio Debono to Bishop Labini between 27 November 1798 and 27 September 1799

Processi, Scritture, Lettere della Sagra Suprema Congregazione del S. Offo., e di diverse Sagre Congregazioni, atti, ed altro appartenente a questo S. Tribunale della Sma. Inquisizione di Malta consegnati all' Illmo., e Rmo. Monsig. Labini Vescovo di Malta.

A di 27 Novembre 1798

Memorie dell'Inquisitori, Registri di Lettere scritte da Monsignori Inquisitori alle Sagre Congregazioni, volumi numero 16

A di 28. detto

volumi numero 24

A di 29 detto

Lettere della Segreteria di Stato.

Volumi numero 17

A di 3 dicembre

Altri numero 21

A di 4 detto

Altri numero 12

A di 7 detto

Altri numero 11

A di 10, 12, 13 e 14 dicembre detto

Tomi di Lettere della S. Suprema Congregazione del S. Offizio, sino l'anno 1795.

Volumi 32

Processo contro il Confessore del Monistero di S. Margarita.

Volume 1

Processo contro il Sacerdote Emmanuele Oliveira	1
Processo informativo del Chierico Fotio Psaromiti	1
Processo contro il paroco della Città Senglea	1

[f. 1v] Processo contro i Liberi Muratori 1
A di 17 dicembre 1798 Fasci di processi

Memorie antiche del S.Offizio, Registri di Consulte, ed altro	numero 2
Più scritte, e denuncie avanti li primi Inquisitori	1
Processi, e scritte avanti Cubelles, Roias, Vescovi, ed Inquisitori, ed avanti l'Inquisitori Duzina, Santumano, e Corso	2
Petruccio, e Cefalotto	4
Libertano	8
Diotallevi	24

A di 18 detto

Processi, e Scritte avanti li Vescovi, et Inquisitori Cubelles, et Roias, et Inquisitori Duzina, Santumano, Corso, e Petrucci	3
Bellardito	9
Dell'Armi	13
Diotallevi	26
Diotallevi	26
Bubalo [Bufalo]	14

A di 20 detto

Bubalo	15
Costa	7
Ortensio	18
Cefalotto più scritte contro Monsignor Gargallo su' la pensione	6

[f.2] Dicembre 1798

Carbonesio	30
Verallo	19
Verallo	22
Verallo	22
Ortensio	16

A di 22 Dicembre detto

Ortensio	17
Verallo	23
Corbario	27
Corbario	28
Marescotti	72
Delagonissa	36
Delagonissa	37

Delagonissa	38
Delagonissa	39

A di 29 detto

Bovio	43
Bovio	43
Torrello [Torello]	40
Taurello [Torello]	42
Herrera	46
Herrera	47
Visconti	45
Delarmi	12
Seristorio	48
Seristorio	48

[f.2v] Diverse lettere della Sagra Congregazione di Propaganda, e della Segreteria de' Brevi sfuse

A di primo Agosto 1799

Processo d'assassino contro Fra Carlo de Oyme, Fra Aloisio Morins cavalieri Gerosolimitani, Ambrosio Zammit, Giuseppe Abel, e Caterina Manduca Fasci 1

Fasci di processi contro li Cavalieri	[?] e 2
Passionei	120
Gualtieri	117
Caracciolo	101
Caracciolo	99

A di 6 Agosto detto

Gori	54
Gori	55
Vidoni	88
Vidoni	86
Gori	58
Tempi	75
Vicecomitis [Visconti]	79
Tempi	74
Ferreri	96
Delci	103
Oddi	67
Acquaviva	91
Chigi	53
Ilcio [Innico Caracciolo]	104

[f. 3] A di 22 Agosto 1799

Verallo Fasci 21

Gennajo	11
Diotallevi	25
Carbonesi	32
Carbonesi	33
Tornellio [Tornielli]	40
Cabelletti [Cavalletti]	60
Borromei	69
Casanatte	71
Cantelmi	81
Caraccioli	83
Caraccioli	84
Ruffo	93
Ruffo	94
Ferrerio	95
Spinola	97
Spinela [sic]	98

A di 30 Agosto detto

Casalotto	5
Carbonesi	31
Aliferi [Alfieri]	50
Oddi	66
Ranutio	73
Bichi	76
Pignatelli	61
Cantelmi	82

Agosto 1799

Ilcio	106
Passionei	121
Passionei	122
Gori	57
Vidoni	87
Vidoni	89

A di 7 Settembre detto

Pallavicini	107
Bellardito	10
Verallo	20
Carbonesio	29
Carbonesio	34
Taurello	41
Taurello	42
Visconti	44
Aliferi	49
Chigi	51
Chigi	52

Zondadari	132
Zondadari	133
Gallarati	134
Gallarati	135
Carpineo [Carpegna]	136
Carpineo	137
Carpineo	138

Repertorio di Comparizioni, e Denunzie.
 Altro di Risoluzioni della Congregazione.
 Più processi, e comparizioni, e denunzie sfuse
 La S. Visita di Monsig. Duzina.

A di 27 Settembre detto

Repertorio di Comparse, e denunzie.
 Altro di Risoluzioni della Congregazione.
 Tomi 4 di Lettere con pergamena in foglio.
 Un processo Criminale contro Francesco Turrensi c.s. numero 167.
 Un fascio di spontanee, e denunzie numero 31.
 Altre sudetti, processi, scritture, ed altro

[f. 5] sopra descritto non esistono altri; che quei Civili del S. Offizio e della Rev. Fabrica di S. Pietro di Roma, quali sono in mio potere.

Così è

[signed] Ignazio Debono Cancelliere del S. Offizio

[ff. 5v to 6: blank]

[f. 6v: title]: Processi, Scritture ed altro/appartenente al S. Tribunale del S./Offo, consegnati all' Illmo., e Rmo / Monsig Vescovo l'anno 1798, e / 1799 / Da me Ignazio Debono Cancelliere / di detto S. Offizio

Source: AIM Civ. 580 (unfoliated)

Document 7

**Request from the Maltese Church to the British Administration in Malta, dated
 ca. 19 September 1800**

Eccellenza

Il Promotor Fiscale della Gran Corte Ecclesiastica umilissimo Servitore dell'Eccellenza Vostra, con tutto ossequio l'espone, che due anni addietro per ordine

del Governo Francese furono trasportati dall'archivio della Gran Corte Vescovile tutt'i Processi Civili, e diverse altre scritture e carte ivi esistenti all'Archivio Generale. Or essendo tutti questi Processi, Scritture, come pure quei che trovansi nel Tribunale del Sant'. Officio, ed altri riportati nel Tribunale della Gran Corte della Castellania, tutti spettanti alla Corte Ecclesiastica; perciò l'esponente ricorre umilmente all'Eccellenza Vostra, supplicandola d'ordinare, che siano di nuovo restituiti alla medesima Corte Ecclesiastica i sudetti Processi, e Scritture, e della Grazia etc.

Gubernator
Insularum melitae et Gaulos
Fiat. Dat. In Pal. Die xix 7bris 1800
Com.us Fr. Caiet.us Bruno Aud.r

[contains the following attached note]:

Si compiacerà l'Illustrissimo Signor Giudice di consegnare al Capitano della Curia Vescovile li Processi, ed altre scritture spettanti alla detta Curia, e pieno di stima mi dico

Devotis.mo ed Oblig.mo Serv.re
Can.co Simone Biagio Assess.re

Source: Gatt, 426-7

