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Maltese heroism as depicted in literature on the Great Siege of Malta of 1565

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Going through the literature on the Great Siege of 1565 one comes across many Maltese, participants in this important event, in the annals of this small Mediterranean archipelago. Some of these inhabitants are identified by name, but other individuals and groups are faceless and anonymous. Yet, known or unknown, it is stated all along the passages of the Christian literature of this eventful siege, that these Maltese formed the backbone of resistance to the Muslim invader. Being the most numerous, single group on the Island, it is no wonder that they made up quite an important element in the defence of Malta. The existing literature recounting the siege is charged with the high respect paid to these Maltese inhabitants and their deeds and actions as supporters and faithful subjects of the Order of St John. Analysing the comments and observations in the pro-Christian, pro-Order, literature, one needs to put such high regard within the framework of the patriotic vein in which such episodes were written.

The Maltese in this narrative generally appear as dependable supporters of a foreign power that was at that moment in command of their lives and future. Thus, for example, at one moment during the siege on Fort St Elmo, Grand Master La Valette sent twenty knights and 100 Maltese soldiers of the Birgu Company in aid of the assailed fort. Zabarella describes these as "*tutti volontari e di grande animo, abbenchè si sapessero votati a certa morte*"¹ [all volunteers, and highly courageous, as they knew that they were destined to certain death].

The same author also selects particular Maltese and describes their praiseworthy feats showing their importance in the woven fabric that kept together the

Christians during this siege. Thus, for example, Mattia Bajada was "*un abile nuotatore del Borgo*"² [an able swimmer from Birgu]. He was a courier who knew how to mix with the Muslim troops and pass as one of them. Bajada could get messages through enemy lines and La Valette seems to have found him quite indispensable. So much so that when the Grand Master had not received an expected response from the inland city of Mdina regarding a relief force thought to have arrived, Zabarella recounts that the old Christian leader sent "*il fido Bajada*"³ [the faithful Bajada] to that citadel to bring an answer from Mesquita to La Valette's query.

The Maltese population was mainly made up of common folk or "*bassa plebe*". Such inhabitants, normally living a simple, quiet life, had now to face a time of turmoil as the Turkish armada had come to turn their largely uneventful lives upside down. Bosio makes it clear that the Maltese population, "*si riempie in quel principio di gran timore*" [was at first filled with great fear]. However, he also adds in the same breath that such fear did not persist and the population "*universalmente molto coraggiosa, e ardita divenne*"⁴ [became amply courageous and daring].

Such collective spirit was also reflected in Giglio's description of the inhabitants of this small Island. The author states that "*i nostri*" [our people], not only the soldiers and the men but also the women and children, "*animosamente*" [courageously] carried earth to the fortresses for the construction of the defences.⁵ Giglio builds on this positive picture of the Maltese inhabitants and increases even further the dose of esteem he had bestowed on them. Thus, when food was becoming scarce inside the besieged Christian towns, the Grand Master gave the destitute Maltese the necessary food even though they could not pay for it. This, they had earned, according to this author, as these had helped in the necessary work on the fortifications with all the "*zelo possibile*" [possible zeal] and "*con tanto buon animo e fedeltà che lodare appena non si potrebbe*"⁶ [with so much good disposition and loyalty which could never be praised enough]. And for good measure borrowing from Bosio, Giglio also adds, that during the whole siege, "*fu particolarmente ricordato*" [was specifically recorded] that no native Maltese was ever seen retreating in face of the enemy.⁷

1. C.S. Zabarella, *Lo Assedio di Malta* (Torino, 1902), 300.

2. *Ibid.*, 199.

3. *Ibid.*, 307.

4. I. Bosio, *Dell'Istoria dela Sacra Religione Et Ill.ma Militia Di San Giovanni Gierosolimitano* (Napoli, 1684), 513.

5. F. Giglio, *Il Memorabile Assedio di Malta del 1565* (Malta, 1853), 34.

6. *Ibid.*, 57.

7. *Ibid.*

Gaetano Gauci stands out in his patriotic writing as he reiterated an episode during the Muslim attacks on Fort St Michael. Grand Master La Valette sent Fra Baldassare Simiana who was followed by his Company, a band of Maltese sappers and "*dalla solita turba di donne e di giovanotti*" [the usual throng of women and youngsters]. This mass of civilians became the protagonist of yet another successful deed in this Christian-Muslim *melee*. Gauci points out that a rain of stones without limit, thrown by that group of women and adolescents "*oscurava l'aere, e metteva in scompiglio l'inimico, reso attonito dal grande schiamazzo di quella plebe che a squarciato grido urlava: tira, tira! dagli, dagli*"⁸ [darkened the sky and threw in disorder the enemy, who was astounded by the extensive shouting of those common people, who shouted at the top of their voices: throw, throw! pelt them, pelt them].

Gauci follows this vein of heroism, as he takes up another incident in the Muslim attack on Fort St. Michael. As the assault continued the Christian side defended the post relentlessly. The author focuses specifically on the Maltese women who, "*fatte ardimentose per la vittoria*" [becoming bold after the victory] achieved on the spur of Fort St Michael, they "*abbandonano i pargoletti in culla, ed impugnando ferri, sassi, mazze ed ogni cosa che loro veniva, corrono precipitose anche esse alla battaglia*"⁹ [neglect their babies in their cots, and taking up swords, stones, clubs and anything that came to hand, they too dash precipitously into battle].

The Maltese were perceived to possess such good qualities. Balbi di Correggio does not keep back from mentioning some actions that he felt were worth underlining. One such case was that of a certain Luqa, who "had a strange passion for taking Turks alive." Balbi di Correggio explains how this valiant Maltese soldier did it: "His method was to make a faint, and he was so quick in handling his sword that he used to bring them down without wounding them." The writer concludes that on that day this Maltese soldier captured many slaves in this way.¹⁰

This same author mentions other Maltese by name. Amongst them, four compatriots from the Post of

Bormla caught his eye during the enemy action in which the Turks attempted to hack the chain, which enclosed the creek between St Angelo and St Michael. On 11 July 1565, according to Balbi di Correggio, these four Maltese soldiers by the names of Pietru Bola, Martin, Gianni tal-Pont, and Franciscu, sensing the grave danger of the enemy action seem to have taken the matter into their hands. They "leaped down from the wall with sword, buckler and headpiece, showing courage and determination worthy of the most warlike people." This spirited action forced the enemy to abandon what it had set out to accomplish, and though the Muslims swam away, the Maltese did not let go. As Balbi di Correggio relates: "although the musketry of the enemy was hot, the Maltese men swam after them, killing one and wounding the others." And to conclude this heroic act, the writer sums up: "In this manner the Turks were frustrated and our men came back unhurt."¹¹

Balbi di Correggio, who was documenting the siege day by day, did not lump the Maltese into one homogeneous group but made sure to bring out the individualism from within the collective. He identified specific qualities and characteristics and attached names to such labels. So we get people like Pawlu Micho and Pawlu Dawla, "two old Maltese of great integrity"¹² and master Marco, the Grand Master's tailor, "a Maltese who on this day, and on all other occasions, fought like a very good Christian and a soldier."¹³

According to sources close to the siege itself, the Maltese were really proving themselves, so much so that when the Grand Master was advised to move all the Order's records and relics to St Angelo for better safekeeping, he declined to do so. La Valette took this decision as he felt that this action would dishearten and discourage not only the soldiers but also the Maltese, "*che si portavano tanto valorosamente, e più che non si sperava di loro*"¹⁴ [who were behaving so courageously and more than which no one could hope for from them].

Gentile di Vendome relates one action on the Post of Castille. La Valette, with sword in hand, incited all to fight as, "*era più necessario combattere che*

8. G. Gauci, *Il Grande Assedio Di Malta Nel 1565* (Malta, 1891), 109.

9. *Ibid.*, 123-4.

10. F. Balbi di Correggio, *The Siege of Malta 1565* (transl. by H.A. Balbi), (Copenhagen, 1961), 67.

11. *Ibid.*, 107.

12. *Ibid.*, 108.

13. *Ibid.*, 154.

14. P. Gentile di Vendome, *Della Historia di Malta et successo della Guerra seguita tra quei Religiosissimi Cavallieri, & il potentissimo Gran Turcho Sultan Solimano, l'anno MDLXV* (no place of publication, no pagination) [c.1566], n.p.

esortare” [it was more necessary to fight than to exhort]. The author paints a scene full of adrenalin, a fight-to-the-death atmosphere. “*Il gran maestro, i Cavalieri, i maltesi, le donne, i giovinetti tutti insieme corsero contro gli inimici, e con gran meraviglia in poco tempo furono ributtati dalla fortizza*” [the Grand Master, the Knights, the Maltese, the women, the youngsters all together ran towards the enemy, and with great wonder in a short time these were thrown off from the fort]. And as if to end the action on the right poetic note, the author continued: “*l’assalto durò fino al tramonto del sole*” [the assault continued up till sunset].¹⁵

Maltese participation is depicted as unstinting. All seem to have taken part in this siege. Domenico Curione recognised the contribution of all, including (and especially so, being a Christian) of divine assistance. Infact he wrote that with the simultaneous attacks on Birgu and St Michael, it was so terrible “*che se Iddio non avesse particolarmente aiutati i difensori, facendo, ch’in fino le donne, e i fanciulli aiutassero valorosamente i combattenti*” [that if God had not assisted the defenders, permitting even the women and children to boldly help the soldiers], along with other actions taken, it would have been quite possible that one of those two forts would have been lost.¹⁶

It is quite evident that all such instances reflect a type of perspective, which comes from one side of the spectrum. Christian writings about the Great Siege made it quite clear that “our” side was the winning side, even in the direst moments of the siege. The Christians were never really on the losing end. The Maltese are pictured as equal partners in this conflict. They are described as admirable fighters, bold participants in a bloody, extraordinary battle, which few, if any, of them had ever experienced anything similar to it. Yet their behaviour was highly laudable. They were described as offering a resistance equal to that of seasoned troops. The words of Anton Francesco Cirni perhaps sums it all: “*li nostri fortamente ributtavano li nemici, perciò che infino à fanciulli e alcune donne co sassi facevano mirabil difesa*”¹⁷ [our side stalwartly threw back the enemy, since even the children and some women throwing stones put up an admirable defence]. And if this is not enough, Gaetano

Gauci puts it in another, more patriotic, explicitly Maltese way. He relates that so much valour surprised all of Europe. More than this, such heroism was the glory of nearly all the Christian peoples, but in which the Maltese had the greatest share of the laurels. “*E Maltesi erano in gran parte i soldati; Maltesi erano i fanciulli, le donne che doposto il femmineo timore, si slanciarono più volte all’assalto coraggiosi ed arditi contro il nemico, coprendolo di un nembo di sassi*”¹⁸ [And Maltese were the majority of the soldiers, Maltese were the children, and the women who, putting aside their feminine fear, courageously and daringly went forward in repeated attacks against the enemy covering him in a cloud of stones].

Thus is depicted the Maltese share in the Great Siege of Malta in the Christian accounts which related this three-month conflict in the tiny island of Malta in the summer of 1565.

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15. Ibid., n.p.

16. D. M. Curione, *Il Glorioso Trionfo della Sacra Religione Militare de’ Nobili, Vaolorosi, & Invitti Cavalieri di S. Giovanni Gierosolimitano* (Napoli, 1618), 328.

17. A. F. Cirni, *La Guerra ultima di Francia, la celebrazione del Concilio Tridentino, il soccorso d’Orano, l’impresa del Pignone, e l’Historia dell’assedio di Malta* (Roma, 1567), 102.

18. Gauci, 133.