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[p.59] The Archives of Palermo and Maltese Medieval History:

A first Report*

Godfrey Wettinger

Since the government of the islands of Malta and Sicily for the whole of the Middle Ages was subject to that of Sicily, inevitably one expects the central government archives at the *Archivio di Stato*, Palermo, to be of vital importance to the Maltese medieval historian. Their significance was fully recognized in Malta back in the seventeenth century, and the early erudite historians and antiquarians like Commendatore G.F. Abela made full use of such transcripts as came their way of documents preserved in that depository at Palermo.¹ However, little progress has been made. Massive collections of documents originating from the administration at Palermo were built up during the eighteenth century, but hardly any evidence survives of purposive historical research at the Palermo archives concerning Malta and Gozo right down to the present century.² Reputable historians like Mons. A. Mifsud and Roberto Valentini utilized the hitherto largely untapped local resources and did nothing about Palermo.³ Occasionally, documents concerning Malta and Gozo were published by foreigners, mostly as part of large collections of documents.⁴ Henri Bresc's recent study on the Secrezia of Malta during the Late Middle Ages was the first major study based almost solely on Palermo documentation.⁵

[p.60] Towards the end of the eighteenth century the notorious Abate Vella published a long series of spurious documents concerning Sicily as well as Malta during the Muslim

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¹ In particular, NLM, Univ. 206, but several others as well.

² J. Azzopardi, *Archives of the Cathedral of Malta: Misc.* 32A: 1313-1529 (The Malta Study Center of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Malta 1977), especially p. 12.

³ The articles and documents published by A. Mifsud are to be found mainly dispersed through local publications like *Archivum Melitense* and *La Diocesi di Malta*; those of R. Valentini are mainly in *Archivio Storico di Malta* published in Rome.

⁴ G. Cosentino, *Codice diplomatico di Federico III d'Aragona re di Sicilia* (1355-1377) (Palermo, 1885); F. Lioni, *Codice diplomatico di Alfonso il Magnanimo* (Palermo, 1891); G. Silvestri, *I capibrevi di Giovanni Luca Barberi* (Palermo, 1878, 1886, 1888) all publish in full or calendar form documents found in the Palermo State Archives concerning Malta. With them one can also add B. and G. Lagumina, *Codice diplomatico dei giudei di Sicilia* (Palermo, 1884) and others.

⁵ H. Bresc, 'The "Secrezia" and the Royal Patrimony in Malta: 1240-1450,' in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell (London, 1975). See also especially H. Bresc, 'Documents on Frederick IV of Sicily's Intervention in Malta: 1372,' *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XLI (1973).

period,⁶ an enterprise which deservedly cost him several years of imprisonment but which has confused generations of historians.⁷ It should be realized that no archival documentation for the Muslim period on Malta or Gozo has survived anywhere. Nor is this surprising since nothing more than the merest fragments of such documentation have survived for any other country during that period.⁸ However, Sicily does have a small number of *platee* or lists of serfs on land donated to ecclesiastical institutions going back to Norman times.⁹ They are written in Arabic and Greek, and are immensely long, one of them extending to no less than seven metres. Only one *platea* is in the State Archives of Palermo, but microfilm copies of others can be consulted there and photo-copies made. For Maltese studies they are highly interesting because of the considerable light they shed on Maltese medieval nomenclature, whether surnames, nicknames or place-names. They were inadequately published a century ago by Salvatore Cusa,¹⁰ but Maltese scholars have remained completely unaware of their contents and importance because the Public Library at Valletta failed to acquire a copy. At least six of the serfs thus documented seem to have had some kind of connection with Malta and two others with Gozo:

Abu Bakr al Mal(i)ti	Ghisa al Mal(i)ti
Ghomor bin al (Mal(i)ti	Mefrig al Mal(i)ti
Ghotman his brother	Nighma al Ghawd(i)si
Awlad al Mal(i)ti	‘Ali his brother

[p.61] Among the traditional Maltese surnames appearing among the names of these serfs of Norman Sicily, most of them Muslim, one finds:

Buhagiar	Sammut	Curmi
Busalib	Far	Gibasal
Borg	Zghendo	Ghaxaq
Tabone	Galea	Ghebejjer
Agius	Brincat	Said
Fitien	Caruana	Debbus
Zammit	Xerri	Felu

⁶ G. Vella, *Libro del Consiglio di Egitto tradotto da Giuseppe Vella cappellano del sacro ordine gerosolimitano, abate di S. Pancrazio* (Palermo, 1793); *Codice diplomatico di Sicilia sotto il governo degli Arabi, pubblicato per opera e studio di Alfonso Airolti arcivescovo di Eraclea, giudice dell’apostolica Legazione, e della regia monarchia del regno di Sicilia* (Palermo, 1789-92), 6 vols.

⁷ D. Scinà and Adelaide Baviera Albanese, *L’arabica impostura* (Palermo, 1978). A.A. Caruana, *Frammento critico della storia di Malta* (Malta, 1899) reveals an inclination to accept part of the contents of the Velala documents as genuine.

⁸ U. Rizzitano, *Storia e cultura nella Sicilia saracena*, (Palermo, 1975), esp, Ch. II ‘Nuovi fonti arabe per la storia dei musulmani di Sicilia,’ originally published in *Rivista degli Studi orientali* (Rome, 1957); M. Talbi, *L’Emirat Aghlabide*, 184-296/800-909 (Paris, 1966).

⁹ P. Bulgarella, *Nozioni di diplomazia Siciliana* (Palermo, 1978), pp. 42-44; I. Peri, *Uomini, città e campagne in Sicilia dell’XI al XIII secolo* (Roma-Bari, 1978), passim but especially Ch. III ‘La terra: il castello, il borgo, i casali.’

¹⁰ S. Cusa, *I diplomi greci ed arabi di Sicilia pubblicati nel testo originale, tradotti ed illustrati*, vol. I (Palermo, 1868). Vol. II was never published; it had to contain all the critical apparatus which is totally missing from vol. I. On Cusa’s edition see F. Gabrieli, ‘Un secolo di studi Arabo-Siculi,’ *Studia Islamica*, vol. 2 (1954), esp. pp. 95-96.

Sultana	Qatet	Buni
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The old Gozitan surname Mintoff (originally Mintuf) is represented by the entry *Ibn al Mentouf*, a serf of the monastery of Monreale who lived at Calatrasi in May 1178.¹¹

Quite a few of the serfs' names are identical with at least a component element of innumerable Maltese or Gozitan place-names indicating that the latter probably originated as personal references and had no descriptive significance:

Baqqari	Hida	Ferħa	
Busrawel	Maħluf	Tamim	Wāli
Ramadan	Gaghfer	Mejmun	Għallis
Għamiq	Barka	Għatiq	Muftaħ
Berbri	Iaghqub	Għasri	Buġibba
Trux	Sammati	Biež	Dibaġ
Għabid	Mġieghed	Abu l-Għaġin	Marzuq
Qajjed	Għallun	Għammar	Hažrun
Mhalhal	Salāma	Balluta	Žonqor
Usif	Jahlef	Ħlas	Ġawhar
Bin Ġemaghħa	Rażun	Għomor	Fieres
Qarraba	Għaži	Abu Langas	Dhalem
Għabdun	Ġabrun	Ġabbar	Samra

The *tabulari*, collections of mostly notarial documents concerning property rights put together by religious corporations suppressed soon after the Unification of Italy, spanning the whole Norman and later medieval periods, contain some 6361 documents.¹² A couple of them concerning Malta and Gozo have been recently published by H. Besc in *Melita Historica*.¹³ Others have been published from seventeenth and eighteenth century transcripts in these [p.62] archives¹⁴ or in the manuscript collections of the Biblioteca Comunale di Palermo.¹⁵ The possibility of further discoveries of similar documents in such collections is evident but entails laborious research and the proportion of documentation that is relevant to the history of Malta must be minimal. The same can also be said about the vast collection of notarial registers in the State Archives of Palermo.¹⁶ Any find would, however, be correspondingly important, especially if it antedated 1400.

The main and most fruitful series of registers belonging to the medieval government of Sicily, those of the *Real Cancelleria* and the *Protonotario* begin to contain anything about

¹¹ Cusa, p.169.

¹² Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, *Itinerari Archivistici Italiani: Sicilia*, p. 7.

¹³ H. Besc, 'Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano,' *Melita Historica*, vol. VI, No. 3 (1974).

¹⁴ C. Schroth-Köhler, T. Kölzer, H. Zielinski, 'Zwei staufische Diploma für Malta aus den Jahren 1198 and 1212,' *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters namens der Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, XXXIII, No. 2 (1977).

¹⁵ R. Grillo, 'Un pernicioso contrasto tra la Malta dei Cavalieri e il Re di Sicilia,' *Melita Historica*, VIII, No. 2 (1981).

¹⁶ See the references to Palermo notaries in H. Besc, 'The "Secrezia" and the Royal Patrimony in Malta: 1249-1450,' pp. 132, 133; cf. with reference to Trapani notary in *ibid.*, p. 149.

Malta soon after 1350. They suffer from serious gaps down to 1392, but almost every volume of both series after that date contains something about Malta and it is impossible here to do more than indicate the wealth of information thus available to the historian. The present writer has examined almost every register of the *Real Cancelleria* down to 1530, but only some twenty registers of the parallel series *Del Protonotario* have been examined.¹⁷

Of fundamental importance in the study both of the local administration of Malta and Gozo as well as that of family influence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are the yearly appointments to municipal offices in the two islands.¹⁸ These had to be registered both in the *Real Cancelleria* series as well as in that of the *Protonotario*, but about a third seem to have missed registration in the former during the fifteenth century. Most of the missing ones may yet be found in the latter, but the two series overlap so much [p.63] that examining both is highly tedious and conducive to a considerable duplication of results.

The long series of capitoli published by Giambruno and Genuardi down to 1458 can, of course, be extended right down to 1530 by means of the entries in the *Real Cancelleria* registers, but all the capitoli concerning Malta are still available in Maltese archives in the original or in official copy form.¹⁹ Still it has been possible to discover three hitherto unknown capitoli belonging to the island of Gozo.²⁰

Defence and the provision of wheat have a prominent place in these registrations, the latter disappointingly usually merely wheat for the use of the garrison of St. Angelo or the disposal of redundant wheat belonging to the Crown, the former frequently consisting of the appointment of bombardiers and other garrison men or the dispatch and provisioning of vessels sent with relieving forces to the island in times of invasion, both frequently duplicated by entries in the *Lettere Viceregie*. Neither the one nor the other type gives much away in the way of global statistics of wheat importation or the size of relieving forces. Thus the relieving force of 1429 is illustrated by documentation concerning the dispatch of individual ships as well as by interesting details concerning the design of the flag carried by the relieving army

¹⁷ The following archive sections were examined at least in part: *Real Cancelleria* (254 registers), *Protonotario* (29 registers), *Lettere viceregie* (72 registers), *Conservatoria di Registro* (11 registers), *Tribunal del Real Patrimonio: Miscellanea* (14 registers), *Miscellanea Archivistica* (2 registers), *Tribunal del Real Patrimonio: Maestro Portulano* (12 registers), *Segreteria del Regno: Ramo Protonotaria* (1 register). All pages were individually examined, no reliance being put on the indexes accompanying each register.

¹⁸ G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano* (Malta, 1647), pp. 422-443, prints a list of the jurats of Malta for the period 1404-1530 (reprinted in Baron Azzopardi, *Raccolta di Cose Antiche e moderna riguardanti Malta e Gozo*, Malta, 1843, pp. 50-60), but hopelessly incorrectly.

¹⁹ S. Giambruno and L. Genuardi, *Capitoli inediti delle città demaniali di Sicilia* (Palermo, 1918), pp. 322-338 for Gozo, and pp. 374-444 for Malta. Originals are to be found mainly in Cathedral Museum, Md., Cathedral Archives, Misc. Ms. 34. Others are also to be found at the National Library of Malta, Valletta.

²⁰ See the document published in the Appendix. The new Gozo capitoli are dated 24 July 1467, 26 June 1479 and 6 April 1521 and are to be found in A[rchivio di] S[tato] P[alermo], *Real Cancelleria*, vol. 119, fols. 240v-241, vol. 141, fols. 605v and vol. 269-270, fols. 365v-369v.

but no other more significant detail or whether and when the force actually arrived in Malta.²¹ Occasionally some information is given about the new armaments sent to Fort St. Angelo and the cost of repairs to the walls, but hardly ever about the nature of the repairs or the extensions to the fortifications. Details are given about the Viceroy's visits of 1485 and 1492 but only about the ships accompanying their trips not about the problems which he tackled during stay in Malta.

The *Real Cancelleria*, like the *Protonoiario*, is particularly rich on the documentation of royal grants of land, feudal or otherwise. Of course, the transfer of land between private individuals is not registered in these sources. Nor do the latter contain anything about the lands of the Church except for [p.64] the rare gifts of Crown land to ecclesiastical institutions. In fact ecclesiastical affairs are only represented by (a) occasional collations to royal benefices including some of the highest appointments in the cathedral, (b) documentation of the administration of the temporalities of the Maltese diocese during vacancies, and (c) the occasional grants of favours from the Crown requested by the bishop. This paucity of documentation, though entirely in the nature of things, is particularly unfortunate since the medieval ecclesiastical archives of the archdiocese of Palermo, which could be expected to contain court proceedings on appeal from the church courts of Malta, have reportedly not survived their accidental involvement in the fighting of the Garibaldi era.

The in-fighting between the leading three or four families of Malta, as it is reflected in the continual disputes between the castellan, the secreto and the town mayor of Mdina, gets frequent mention, usually manifesting itself in the non-payment by the secreto of the salaries of the soldiers garrisoning St. Angelo commanded by the castellan and in jurisdictional disputes between the latter and the town mayor. The frequent marriage alliances between them merely added another element to the causes of their never-ending quarrels and mutual recriminations but these are documented elsewhere.

A large proportion of the viceregal letters to the town officials of Malta and Gozo were sent in answer to private petitions and complaints, requests for favours, and applications. Much biographical information is thus added to what is available in Malta both for important personages like the fief holders and professional men like Pietro Caxaro and for the merest peasant or even his wife or widow who dared complain to the King's officials at Palermo of abuses and injustices allegedly committed by powerful men on the island. The permission to doctors and notaries to practise their profession is regularly entered in the *Real Cancelleria* registers, and occasionally an agreement for the employment of the town grammar schoolmaster is also recorded.

Several documents concern persons who were exiled to Malta from Sicily and others from Malta exiled to the larger island, a subject almost completely unrecorded in the surviving Maltese archives themselves, but which has aroused some interest owing to the misreading of a passage from Dante which seemed to refer to the use of Malta as a prison by its medieval rulers.²² Though [p.65] the court registers of the central government at Palermo

²¹ See Appendix.

²² Dante, *Paradiso*, IX, 52-54:

Piangerà l'altro ancora la diffalta
Dell'empio suo pastor, che sarà sconcia
sì, che per simil non s'entrò in Malta.

were mostly destroyed in the last war,²³ petitions for forgiveness, which were dealt with on an administrative level, have survived in the *Real Cancelleria*, providing the social historian with a necessarily limited but invaluable source of information on the type and level of crime prevalent at the time on the Maltese islands and in Sicily. Several of the Maltese exiled to Sicily had allegedly been involved in murder; at least one of the Sicilians was deported to Malta for having forged Apostolic briefs.²⁴

An interesting subject, even if for the traditional historian merely of marginal importance, is that of the capture and despatch to the King himself of falcons and other birds of prey.²⁵ This is pretty closely documented almost throughout the period 1400-1530, and a study of it should arouse the interest at least of ornithologists and those historians who belong to the wholist school of history, and possibly also of the general public.

Among the most important documents of the *Real Cancelleria* are those recording the granting of Malta and Gozo as a county or marquisate during the last years of the fourteenth century. They have long been known to Sicilian historians who have taken them into account in their histories of Sicily during the time of the tyrants,²⁶ but Maltese historians have so far had to rely on their reports of what they contain. An interesting study would involve a comparison or contrast of these documents with those concerning the pawning of Malta to Monroy in 1421.²⁷

Special notice should be taken of the profuse new documentation on Gozo, an island reputed to have lost all its medieval archives, administrative, notarial and ecclesiastical, during the 1551 assault of the Turks. The *Real Cancelleria* and presumably the *Protonotario* registers contain not only a large proportion of the sets of town officials of the post-1400 period paralleling those of Malta, but also a surprisingly large number of other documents concerned with roughly [p.66] the same subjects as have been indicated for Malta since Gozo had a separate municipal organization.

Other series of registers like the *Lettere Viceregie* and the *Conservatoria di Registri* have also been sampled. The former are particularly rich in material on both Maltese islands but a large proportion duplicates the entries in the *Real Cancelleria* series. The *Conservatoria* registers suffer from the fact that a large number of their entries are of a recurring nature, such as annual payments from the royal revenues.

G. Siebzeher-Vivanti, *Dizionario della Divina Commedia* (Firenze, 1954), s.v. Malta: 'prigione speciale per ecclesiastici colpevoli di gravi reati, che si trovava a Bolsena. Secondo altri: prigione in generale buia e fangosa.'

²³ A Giuffrida, *La giustizia nel medioevo siciliano* (Palermo, 1975), p. 7.

²⁴ ASP, *Real Cancelleria*, vol. 178 (1490-91), fols. 336v-337v.

²⁵ For some references to the subject see H. Bresc, 'The "Secrezia" and the Royal Patrimony in Malta: 1240-1450,' pp. 137-138.

²⁶ Eg. I. La Lumia, 'I quattro vicari' in *Storie Siciliane* (Palermo, 1969), vol. II, pp. 260, 264-65, 288, 290, 299 and 300.

²⁷ G. Wetinger, 'The Pawning of Malta to Monroy,' *Melita Historica* VII, No. 3 (1978). The vitally important Monroy documents in ASP, *Protonotario*, vol. 23, were discovered only because the temporary non-availability of the *Real Cancelleria* registers owing to structural repairs forced the present author to turn to the *Protonotario* registers instead. As it turned out, the *Real Cancelleria* has a brief gap around 1421 and does not contain any of the Monroy documents of that time.

Working back in Malta on the abundant documentation obtained in this manner, however, has had its drawbacks. By perforce ignoring all the stuff not directly and solely concerned with Malta and Gozo material of vital importance for the full understanding of the period would be neglected. Thus the *capitoli del Regno* are as applicable to Malta as to any other place in the Sicilian kingdom, but it is not practicable to examine and secure photocopies of each one; for them one has to fall back on Testa's monumental publication (not available in Malta). Inevitably, however, the Maltese historian is (correctly) tempted to obtain copies of a few non-Maltese documents which could serve to broaden his understanding by way of comparison. Thus one might include a document referring to the lack of rain at Agrigento occurring at the same time that Malta lacked rain for three consecutive years, or the contract of engagement of a schoolmaster by the town authorities of the same Sicilian town. In addition, documents concerning the De Nava family abroad, in Pantelleria and elsewhere, must certainly attract the Maltese historian who, also, cannot do without such background material as he can find on important personages like Monroy who seem to enter into Maltese history unannounced to fade away again without anyone knowing anything about their antecedents or later history. But it is not possible to include more than a few such documents. In evaluating his Malta and Gozo documents the historian therefore has to keep this handicap in mind and find a remedy as best as he may.

[p.67] APPENDIX

I

Reimbursement by the King's financial officers of the money paid at the king's verbal request by David Subtili, secretus of the city of Palermo (a) for the cost of upkeep of the crew of a Venetian vessel which had been detained at Palermo for refusing to join in the relief of Malta, and (b) for the payment he made to the painter Nicolao de Senes for the two banners and pennon he had painted for the army preparing to relieve Malta, 1 February 1430. (ASP, Tribunal del Regio Patrimonio, Lettere viceregie, vol. 2, f.146)

Alfonsus etc.

Vicereges etc. Nobilibus eiusdem regni Sicilie magistris racionalibus et conservatori etc. Quia David Subtili etc. ad mandatum nostrum sibi oretenus factum de pecunia regie curie dicti sui officij annj presentis solvit et expendit pro causis subscriptis videlicet pro pane, caseo, tonnina, vino, carnibus et herbis emptis a diversis personis per manus Tuchj Salera pro substentacione xxij personarum de navj magna Venetiarum tunc existente in portu Panormi carceratarum in sacro palacio dicte urbis ubi steterunt diebus xij et ex eo quia patronus dicte navis recusabat eandem navem naulizare pro eundo in succursum civitatis Meliveti tunc obsesse per hostes Infideles vnciam j tarenos xvij granos vij; Jtem magistro Nicolao de Senes pictorj pro duobus vexillis vno depicto ad arma sancti ieorj et alio ad arma regia et pro vno pinnono pro tubicine nostro ad opus armate que ire parata erat in succursum predictum, computatis cindato, tela sarcis, serico et magisterio vncias iiij tarenos xvj granos x ascendentes ad summam vnciarum vj tarenorum iij granorum xxij prout apparet per quinque apocas manu notari Jacobi de Marco apresentationis magne curie rationum et Inde dicto secreto restitutas suj racionum tempore producendas M. v. expresse quatenus eidem secreto dictas vncias vj tarenos iij granos xvij in exitu sue racionis computare et admictere restitutis presentibus et apocis supradictis sine dubio penitus debeatis. Data Panormi 10 Frebruarj viij Jndicionis (1430). Nicolao de Specialj. Guillemus de Muntayans.

Post datam insignatam declaramus vobis quod dicta duo vexilla recepimus Nos predictus Guillelmus nomine regie curie et eciam dictum pinnonum...

II

Reimbursement by the King's financial officers of the money paid at the king's verbal request by David Subtili, secretus of the city of Palermo for the making of a banner to be used by the army preparing to relieve Malta, then besieged by the Infidels, 8 March 1430. (ASP, Tribunal del Regio Patrimonio, Lettere Viceregei, vol 2, fol. 150v)

Alfonsus etc.

Vicereges etc. Nobilibus eiusdem regni magistris racionalibus et conservatori [p.68] etc. Quia David Subtili secretus et magister procurator felicis vrbis Panormi ad mandatum nostrum sibi oretenus factum de pecunia regie curie dicti suj officij annj presentis solvit et expendit pro fierj faciendo quodam vexillo cum ymagine crucifixi ad opus armate in succursum Meliveti tunc obsesse per hostes infideles vncias tres et tarenos xxvij hoc modo videlicet Symonj de Branchis mercatorj pro cannis tribus cindatj chilestri de Florencia ad rationem tarenorum xxvij pro qualibet canna vncias ij tarenos xxj et magistro Gasparj pictorj pro picture dicti vexilli computatis auro et coloribus vnciam j tarenos vj mandamus vobis quatenus in exitu rationis dicte secretie annj presentis dictas vncias tres tarenos xxvij restitutis presentibus et apocis dictorum Symonis et magistri Gasparj acceptare et admictere penitus debeatis declarantes dictum vexillum fore in manibus nostri predictj Guillelmj Muntayans consignatum per eundem secretum nomine dicte regie curie. Data Panormi viij Marcij viij Jndicionis.

Gullelmus de Muntayans

Nicolaus de Specialj