

Mediaevalia

THE ISLAND OF GOZO

1432 — 1453

By E. R. LEOPARDI

Part I.

The lack of sufficient documents sometimes causes the Mediaeval history of Malta and Gozo to seem obscure. History, especially that of the Middle Ages, has to be compiled from what is to be found in the written document of that period. In the case of our islands the majority of documents have been lost or destroyed during the course of the centuries. What has survived the vicissitudes of various dominations, neglect through ignorance and wholesale destruction in times of plague, are to be found in archives and libraries often far apart which makes research considerably difficult.

In Malta a few important documents concerning the late Middle Ages are preserved in the Royal Library in Valletta, and some others are in the archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral at Notabile. In the island of Gozo, so far, no documents have been found relating to the Middle Ages, in fact the earliest manuscript volume kept among the archives of the Università del Gozo and preserved in the Public Library at Victoria, Gozo, is dated 1560-1592.

In the archives of Palermo, Messina, Catania and Naples, other documents concerning the Middle Ages of Malta and Gozo are to be found. We can safely presume that some documents of that period and relating to Malta and Gozo are to be found at the Vatican Library. Fortunately through the research of scholars interesting documents relating directly or indirectly to both islands are occasionally published abroad, and through these erudite works we are given a glimpse of much we would wish to know. Such a work was published in Palermo in 1918, by Doctors Salvatore Giambruno and Luigi Genuardi. The work is entitled *CAPITOLI INEDITI DELLE CITTA' DEMANIALI DI SICILIA, APPROVATI SINO AL 1458*. Among the other crown lands treated in this work are the island of Gozo on pages 323-335, and the island of Malta on pages 375-423.

There is a copy of this rare work on the shelves of the Royal Library in Valletta, bearing the following press mark: CD. 3. 34. As this article is relating to Gozo we shall deal solely with that part of the work referring to the Capitoli of Gozo.

We shall now attempt to give a brief introduction to the sister isle in mediaeval times. The island of Gozo suffered the same vicissitudes as the island of Malta. As far back as we can go we find that both islands were given as a fief to feudal lords. As stated by Giambruno and Genuardi both islands had changed hands many times being given in fief to Margaritone of Brindisi, grand admiral of Sicily; to Guglielmo Grasso, another admiral; to the Infante Giovanni, duke of Athens and Neopatria; then to his son Infante Federico; to Guglielmo and later to Luigi of Aragon; to Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada; and to Don Artale d'Alagona.

Normally a royal fief was enjoyed by the possessor for as long as he, or his heirs, survived. When, however, the possessor forfeited the fief either through rebellious conduct or behaviour unworthy of the trust placed in him by his sovereign, then the land reverted to the overlord, to be conferred on another favourite.

This constant change of masters and ignoble position was much disliked by the inhabitants of both islands. The people petitioned King Ludovico of Sicily to integrate Malta and Gozo to his crown lands in such a way as no longer would it be possible for either to be donated in fief. In a charter dated 7th October, 1350, King Ludovico granted this petition, though the privilege of being directly under the King was ignored. The usefulness of these islands as a means of rewarding service was too great for the king to renounce. However, when Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada forfeited the fief through high treason, in 1397 king Martin of Sicily fully integrated Malta and Gozo to his crown property. In 1398 the Parliament of Syracuse met to formulate a list of the towns considered as cities of the crown, and in this list we find the islands of Malta and Gozo.

Under the rule of Alfonso, king of Aragon and Sicily, Malta and Gozo were again given as fief in 1420, this time for 30,000 florins to Antonio Cardona, Viceroy of Sicily. In 1425 king Alfonso once more conceded the islands, also for 30,000 florins to Don Consalvo Monroy.

The inhabitants of both islands were sorely tried at this treatment and sent ambassadors to Spain requesting that their homeland be redeemed and returned to the crown, and that all their forfeited privileges be respected as erstwhile. On the 20th June, 1428, the Maltese and Gozitans redeemed these islands by paying 30,000 florins, for which act the king promised that in future both islands were to remain an integral part of his kingdom. In parenthesis we can say that this promise was honoured until 1530, when Malta and Gozo were donated to the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem.

Gozo, ever proud of its ancient privileges, jealously guarded its rights — in fact we find that Gozo had its own government: Consiglio Popolare framed on the form of government in Malta. The titles of the various officials were identical: Capitano della Verga, Giurati, Judges, Catapani, Marammero, etc. Gozo had its own Consuls in Sicily and these dealt directly with the king's representative in Sicily.

We find that petitions were sent by the government of Malta and Gozo separately, either to the king or to the viceroy in Sicily. These petitions were called "capitoli" and the sovereign, or the viceroy, reserved the right to ap-

prove or reject, or adjust them according to circumstances. There are some instances when Malta and Gozo petitioned jointly, thus in a capitolo of 1427 we read: *li presenti capituli si intendanu tantu per la insola di Malta quanto di Gozu.*

The first capitolo mentioned in the book under review relating solely to Gozo is dated at Messina, 31st October, 1482, XI Indiction. The original was written in siculo-latin from which is made the following precis.

Petitioners asked the king to show them clemency. On account of a recent moorish invasion in which great devastation had taken place through destruction of their cattle and crops, they would not be able to harvest grain and other crops, therefore they beseeched the king to decree that they would be allowed to obtain the necessary provisions from Sicily without taxation.

The second clause of this capitolo deals with the importation of cattle. The Gozitans requested exemption from taxation on the importation of livestock, pleading that with the money thus saved they would be enabled to purchase provisions necessary for the population.

In the third clause they begged for an exemption of fine and punishment for the offence of gambling, pleading that by making gambling illegal the population were falling into more pernicious and hazardous games.

The fourth clause asks for a moratorium on account of the moorish invasion.

The fifth clause of this capitolo deals with the elections of government officials. It was petitioned that no longer would the officials be elected by favouritism, and that the Giurati, the Treasurer, the Catapani and Judges of the Civil Court of Gozo together with its Notary be elected in a fair manner.

In the sixth clause they petitioned that no longer would a commissioner be sent from Sicily to decide certain cases in the civil court of Gozo. They stated that on the answer to this petition being favourable they would boycott any foreign commissioner inadvertently sent to Gozo.

In the seventh clause they beseeched the king to reconfirm their ancient privileges, capitoli, freedoms, etc., granted either written or unwritten.

In the eighth clause the Gozitans submitted that the post of Capitano della Verga be conferred on a Gozitan, pleading that among their ranks were many a man worthy of occupying this post. They asked that a foreigner might not be allowed to occupy this position any longer.

The ninth clause also refers to the Capitano della Verga. They asked that the term of office should be for the period of a year, notwithstanding any concession or understanding promised for an extension of the term of office.

In the tenth clause they petitioned that grain harvested from lands belonging to the crown should not be exported from Gozo, but stored on the island for emergency. The reply to this particular clause is interesting and therefore it is included. It was granted that grain grown in Gozo would be for the use of the Gozitans. However, when the harvest was superabundant, then the surplus would be exported to Malta for the use of the citizens and inhabitants of that island.

The last clause of this capitolo shows foresight on the part of the Gozitans. They petitioned to be allowed to import two hundred salmi of Sicilian grain, pleading that should a further moorish invasion take place prior to the gathering of the harvest there would be famine among the population. The reply to this clause was as follows: taking into consideration the more pressing need of Sicily a promise could not then be given.

From the clauses of this capitolo we have a fair idea of conditions prevailing at that time in Gozo. Moorish invasion was a constant and very real fear and devastation was general in those invasions. A certain amount of nepotism and unfairness existed. The higher posts in the government were retained for favoured Sicilians, the king thereby keeping a sure hold of the island. It is evident from clause three that the people had a leaning towards hazardous games and the love of gambling was deep-rooted.

BOOKS! BOOKS! BOOKS!

FOR BOOKS PASS YOUR ORDERS TO

CORDINA'S 'Emporium'

GENERAL STORE

139-140, Britannia Street, Valletta — Malta "G.C."

Well Stocked - Well Supplied - by Well - Known Firms

VISIT OUR SHOW ROOMS