

Mediaevalia

THE ISLAND OF GOZO

1432 — 1453

By E. R. LEOPARDI

Part II.

In *MELITA HISTORICA*, Vol.3, pages 77-80, published in 1962, I gave a precis of a capitolo relating to Gozo. This is marked No. I in the work entitled *CAPITOLI INEDITI DELLE CITTA' DEMANIALI DI SICILIA*, published by Giambruno and Genuardi, Palermo, 1918. My purpose of doing so was to give a picture of the life of the island of Gozo in the middle of the 15th Century. In this number I am giving another four capitoli also relating to Gozo. By this means we can study the conditions under which our forefathers fared: their most pressing needs were mentioned in these petitions.

It is not out of place to mention here that the conditions prevailing in Malta and Gozo in the late Middle Ages were those common to all minor cities of the Kingdom of Sicily. In fact the capitoli of Caltagirone, Corleone, Girgenti, Lentini, Licata, and others of that period are more or less identical to those of Malta and Gozo.

The first of this series of four capitoli is dated at Palermo, 4th May, 1438, 1 Indiction, and marked No.II. It is more or less a repetition of the petition made six years previously. The petitioners once more reminded the King of the hardships they were sustaining through the Moorish invasion of 1429. Using this plea the Gozitans petitioned for exemption from taxation and Excise Duty on goods exported to Gozo from Sicily. In this capitolo the petitioners mention once more the aridity of the soil, their extreme poverty, and lack of means of support through the devastation caused by the Moorish invaders. These capitoli were submitted to the King and to the Viceroy by Giovanni Vigiles, one of the Giurati of the island of Gozo.

This petition was granted on the same day as it was presented to the Viceroy. In a privilege attached to the petition was the permit granting all the requests of the Gozitans. It stated that the island of Gozo was to receive as much grain as was needed from any port whatsoever free from Excise Duty; and in order to ensure that this was carried out the King gave orders that all Portulans, Viceportulans and all other minor portulans were to abide by these conditions.

The privilege states that the benefit of this condition was only to be enjoyed by the island of Gozo, and the inhabitants of that island were forbidden to trade with other places in the grain obtained tax-free from Sicily. As this excise-free merchandise was to be conveyed to Gozo on Gozitan vessels, the Viceroy obliged the masters of the vessels to furnish the necessary guarantees

that the merchandise would be taken to Gozo and no other port (*et perki nostra omnimoda intencioni e' ki li dicti habitaturi di Gozu haianu la dicta gracia, vi cumandamu expressamenti ki libere et sine contradicione aliqua ex sola tantum exhibicione presentis permictiti li dicti Gaudisani cum quali si vogla navi oy navili et barki extrahiri di ciasquidunu di li dikti porti et caricaturi da undi vurrannu per portari in Gozu, comu e' dictu, per usu e provisioni di la dicta insola et non in altri loki, tucti quantitati di frumentu oy victuagli franki di omni dirittu di tracta,*).

This concession to the island of Gozo in 1438 shows how the people of these islands were considered in no less a way than the inhabitants of the island of Sicily. Such concessions were granted on different occasions to the Sicilians of the Kingdom of Aragon. It also brings to our realization how great had been the disaster sustained by the Gozitans in the Moorish invasions of the first part of the 15th century and the hardships following the abduction of man-power and pillage of cattle.

On the 20th July, 1489, Notary Angelo de Manuelli submitted another capitolo to the Viceroy of Sicily — marked No. III.

The Gozitans again, in this capitolo, draw attention to their woeful state of poverty which impeded their being able to nourish the soil to provide the crops necessary for their maintenance.

They drew attention to the petition, made in the previous year, through which they had been granted special privileges for the importation of grain and commestibles from Sicily. The Gozitans lamented that owing to loss of ships they had not been able to take advantage of the grant. The lack of vessels was due to the pillaging corsairs of Calabria. Once more the Gozitans drew attention to their penury which did not enable them to cultivate the land. Gozo was so close to the state of famine that they lacked a grain of corn or barley. They then stated that they had been spared from starvation on account of the generosity of Simone di Mazara and Antonio Mule who had sent, to Gozo, a supply of grain which saved them in their great extremity, (*et si non per misser Simuni di Mazara et Antoni Mule, li quali mandaru in quista insola certi quantitati di frumentu, ja moriamu di fami*).

Another clause in this capitolo complains of taxation enforced on the Gozitans. They mentioned how the Honourable Antonio Brunu had actually come to Gozo to collect twenty uncias in taxation. This had caused much surprise to the population of Gozo who were barely able to exist, let alone find the money levied. They pointed out how they thought that giving their service to the king to fight his enemies was surely sufficient, considering their extreme poverty and the aridity of their soil (*la nostra paupertati, et grandi penuria supra quistu scoglu arridu*). They ended by stating that so great was their poverty that had they had the means they would have left the island, and Gozo would have become deserted (*ja la insola sirria disabitata*).

The Giurati of Gozo concluded this capitolo by saying that they had come to an agreement with *lu dictu Antoni Brunu* regarding the taxation of the twenty uncias. He had consented to accept thirteen uncias at once, the balance to be paid in 18 days time. This sum of thirteen uncias had been collected from the whole island of Gozo and, to emphasize the strain incurred

by the Gozitans to raise this sum, it was said that this money had been extracted from the very marrow of their bones (*teste Deo, extrahimus quasi di intra li ossa nostri*). They begged that they be condoned the seven remaining uncias, taking into consideration their previous pleas of poverty and hunger and military service to the king.

The Viceroy granted this last petition in consideration of the conditions prevailing in Gozo.

The next capitolo — marked No. IV — dated at Palermo, 5th November, 1448, was submitted to the Viceroy by one of the Giurati of Gozo, named Cola de Algaria. This capitolo was on a matter of administrative procedure of the *Consiglio Popolare*. On the plea that the elected members of the Council were at times absent from the island of Gozo, conducting their personal affairs, it was inconvenient to postpone council meetings in which deliberations on important matters were to be taken, until their return. The permission was requested to hold council meetings when necessary even in the absence of certain members. The council held under such conditions would consist of: — the *Capitano della Verga*, his Assessors, the Judges, the Giurati, and the four old Giurati (i.e., those elected for the previous session), and four worthy citizens of the island (*et altri quatuor boni homini di li princhipali di la terra*).

This plea was granted by the Viceroy with the usual *placet*.

Another item of this capitolo refers to the procedure for election of the officials of the government. It was submitted that various worthy citizens and their sons had placed themselves for election, but notwithstanding their excellent qualities and suitability, they had not been appointed. This had occurred because of the nomination of other persons less worthy but having *ex gratia* the favour of high officials. Therefore it was petitioned that no longer should anyone form part of the *Consiglio Popolare* unless elected by popular vote and that those nominated *de gracia* should not be accepted.

Once again the Gozitans objected against payment of taxes on the usual plea of dire poverty and sterility of the soil. They stated that the levying of taxation is not a service to the king, but to the reverse, a disservice to the realm (by which we understand that the payment of taxes must have caused considerable unrest and resentment in Gozo against the ruling power). They now make reference to the manner in which the collector of taxes should perform his duty in the event of the taxation not being lifted. In such an event the collector would not collect the money from one or two citizens who had the reputation of being affluent: all Gozitans are poor, (*perki tucti simu poviri*), they pleaded, without exception and taxation should be borne equally by all citizens. Another request was that the collector of taxes should perform his duties personally, i.e., not by delegation.

It appears from the next item that certain privileges granted to Gozo by a previous Viceroy were not being respected, therefore they ask that the right granted to decide cases of minor importance be respected.

The last clause of this capitolo refers to another angle of the poverty of Gozo: the great lack or rather absence of wood for fuel on the island. From time immemorial the poor of Gozo had taken fallen twigs and branches, and gleaned the lands belonging to the crown. It now appears that the tenants of

the said lands had forbidden the continuance of this age-old usage. On account of the duties performed by these poor people, duties which comprised turns of coast-watching and repairing of city walls (*li dicti poviri su angariati a li guardii di la terra et a la maramma di li mura et multi altri angarii in serviciu di la regia maiestati*), it was requested that they be granted permission to glean once more on the lands of the crown.

The last capitolo in this series — marked No. V — bears the date 14th May, 1453, I Indiction. It was submitted to the King at Naples, by Giovanni de Vigiles, Ambassador of the *Universita'* of Gozo.

His Majesty was informed of the capture of the two Moors (*dui mori nigri*) by the mounted coast-guard of the island. The Moors had been discovered on the shores and had told the guards that they were deserters from the Moorish ships, as it had been their desire to dwell in Gozo. The Gozitans well knew that their story was a fabrication and that they had been landed in Gozo with very ulterior motives. Therefore the two Moors were sold as slaves and the money obtained through this sale was used to purchase weapons to arm the poor of Gozo, to serve them for defence against invaders. As the money from this deal had been used in this manner, the King was beseeched to waive his rights for share of booty.

To this request the King gave his *placet*.

Once again the Gozitans ask that certain privileges granted to them be respected. It appears that a reprieve had been granted to criminals condemned by the local courts. Therefore the authority of the Gozo Courts were being held in contempt. They ask that cases of theft, whether of major or minor degree, should be brought before the court and persons found guilty of such crimes were to be punished accordingly.

The next item refers to the Jewish colony of Gozo. As the members of the colony had gradually shrugged of their duties of free service (*li Judey di la dicta terra et insula si hagianu ysgravatu di multi angarii*) which was normally performed by the Gozitans, they — the Jews — should be obliged to keep a horse for the defence of the island in lieu of service.

The King consented to this measure with the stipulation that the horse should be kept solely for the use of the island in time of war, inclusive of a month before and one month after hostilities had ceased.

The last item of this capitolo refers to the appointment of the judge of Gozo. This office was of annual duration, the occupier being elected yearly. The judge was obliged before taking up his appointment, to present himself to the Viceroy of Sicily, from whom he obtained confirmation of his appointment. The Gozitans petitioned in this capitolo that this procedure be abandoned, as the sea journey to Sicily incurred considerable peril. Besides during the absence of the judge, the population suffered through the lack of administration of justice. It appears that the judge at that time, whose name was Notary Andrea di Bongeminu, was the only legal man in Gozo and he had held the appointment of judge for many terms. He was a Gozitan by birth, he spoke the language of the people, and, to quote the words of the capitolo: "knew everyone on the island high and low" (*li dictu notaru Andria esti oriundu di la dicta insula sa et intendi la lingua et canuci lu pichulu et lu grandu et*

sa li constumi, consuetudini et usanzzi di la dicta terra et insula). He was also loved by his fellow countrymen and held in great esteem and trust.

The Gozitans petitioned the King to appoint *Don Giovanni Bongemini* as a judge, taking into consideration his knowledge of the Maltese language, his excellent qualities and capabilities (*maxime per li boni costumi et usanzzi et intendi la lingua di la dicta insula et esti aptu a servirli in officiu*). It was further pleaded that this appointment should be made in view of all precedents to the contrary, and that the matter be treated as a

King Alfonso graciously added his *placet* to this petition and appointed *Don Giovanni Bongemini* permanent judge as desired.

In conclusion we notice time after time the plea for relief of the island of Gozo on account of the sterility and poorness of the soil. It is hard for us who know Gozo today to picture a state of aridity in a land so fertile and flourishing in agriculture. We can only assume that the continuous Moorish incursions caused the agricultural population to desert their holdings through fear. It is also likely that the invaders burned crops and uprooted trees, and possibly robbed the island of cattle. This last would contribute considerably to the poorness of the soil.

It is to be noted that many of the surnames of Gozitan families mentioned in these capitoli, such as: Gallo, de Manuelli, Mazara, Mula, de Algaria, di Bongemini, were already extinct in the 18th century. We find this fact mentioned in the manuscript work on Gozo by Canon Gian Pietro Agius de Soldanis, entitled: GOZO ANTICO E MODERNO, SACRO E PROFANO (1)

We notice also that the last capitolo, approved by King Alfonso, is signed at Naples, at Castel Nuovo, and bears the date 1453. The reason for the change from Palermo to Naples is obvious. King Alfonso, surnamed "the Magnanimous", having liberated Naples from Angevin rule, entered that city on the 12th June, 1442, and was recognised King of Naples by Pope Eugen IV in 1443. Alfonso assumed the title of "Re delle due Sicilie" which title then appeared for the first time on coins bearing the words *Siciliae citra et ultra*. With the creation of the new kingdom Naples became the capital: Palermo was no longer the centre of the Royal Courts and Sicily became of lesser importance than erstwhile: it was a *diminutio capitis*.

Reading through the capitoli of twenty-one years from 1432 to 1453, we cannot but be impressed by the dire state of Gozo through piracy of her ships on the high seas and Moorish incursions on land. Likewise we cannot but be impressed by the unflinching courage and spirit of the Gozitans in spite of great odds. They were determined to maintain their privileges and government of the island. It is also shown from these capitoli that the King and Viceroy readily granted their demands, which acquiescence was most likely due to admiration of the courage and endurance of so small an island. The two Moorish spies referred in capitolo No. V, who tried to pose as deserters could not deceive the Gozitans of the 15th century. As today the Gozitans were gifted with a subtle strain of astuteness which made them masters of most situations.

(1) See a Maltese translation of this work by Mgr. G. Farrugia, Malta, 1959. The surnames of Gozitan families are found in Vol. II, pp. 122-144.