

Joseph J. Camilleri

## THE ABOLITION OF THE CLASS OF ARABIC AT THE LYCEUM

An inquiry on the workings of Government Departments and on public expenditure was ordered by the Head of Ministry. The Committee of Inquiry discussing the position of optional classes at the Lyceum recommended that classes "in Arabic, German, Phonography, Typewriting and Art Drawing, be discontinued on the ground that the number of students who have availed themselves of the opportunity of taking up these subjects and attending the examinations does not justify the expense, amounting to £384 a year, of providing efficient instruction" (1). It was furthermore argued that the average attendance in the class of Arabic at the Lyceum during the previous five years was only five, too low an attendance to justify the payment of a salary of £50 (rising to £80 per annum by £3 triennially) to the teacher in charge. It was recommended that with the concurrence of the Director of Public Instruction "this class be done away with" (2).

When the class was finally abolished in 1913 because no or very few students attended the class, interesting and informative correspondence about this topic started to appear in the local press. Of particular importance was the letter entitled "L'Insegnamento dell'Arabo nel Liceo" written by Civis on 18 March, 1913 (3). This correspondent basing his main arguments on the contents of the book *Raccolta di varie cose antiche e moderne utili ed interessanti riguardanti Malta e Gozo* (4), said that due to historical reasons the Head of Government would have to think more than once before deciding on abolishing the teaching of Arabic at the Lyceum. It was argued that since the School of Arabic knew its origin to a benefice known as "Ta l'Iskof u ta Santa Lucia" (5) the Government had no juridical power to abolish it. Government took special notice of this letter and the Director of Elementary Schools tried to determine Government's liability in the matter.

The benefice "Ta l'Iskof u ta Santa Lucia" which was instituted in 1637 obliged its holder to teach Arabic and to award ten Roman 'scudi' in prizes every six months to diligent students (6). Later on, the obligation of teaching Arabic at the Malta University was imposed on this benefice by a decree of Pope Pius VI to Grandmaster De Rohan on 7 December, 1795 (7). It seemed however, that the chair of Arabic remained vacant and practically non-existent for many years. In fact Sir Alexander Ball, His Britannic Majesty's Commissioner in Malta, complained to Cardinal Secretary of State Consalvi (8) that the holder

of the benefice was under nobody's control and was giving lessons at his own house. He therefore requested the Cardinal to make arrangements with the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of Faith to have the benefice conferred on Brother Cappellano Giuseppe Grasso, a Maltese of the Order of Jerusalem, on condition that he undertook to occupy the chair at the University.

To pursue the matter further, an attempt was made to trace Cardinal Consalvi's reply to Sir Alexander J. Ball and any subsequent correspondence on the subject. Though no record of this reply was found, two other relevant letters were produced. The first letter was that sent on 3 January, 1825, by the Chief Secretary to Government, Sir F. Hankey, to the Archbishop of Malta on the subject of the benefice; the second was the Archbishop's reply. The Chief Secretary to Government said, "In the course of reorganizing the University of Malta, it has come to the knowledge of the Government that in 1795 Grand Master Rohan obtained from the Holy See that the Rector "pro tempore" of a certain benefice called "Ta l'Iskof", who besides other obligations was bound to teach the Arabic Language, should give public lessons in the above mentioned University; but that such concession was not continuously given effect to, inasmuch as the salary of the professor of that language is at present being defrayed by the Government, and it is also stated that your Grace is applying the sums accruing from the vacant benefice to other purposes". Sir F. Hankey concluded by saying that H.E. the Governor desired to be furnished with the necessary information on the subject "with a view to again giving effect to the above mentioned concession and thus enable the Government to save the salary of the professor of Arabic and apply that sum to the advantage of the University" (9). The Archbishop stated that he was not aware that Grandmaster De Rohan had ever obtained from the Holy See that the rents accruing from the benefice "Ta l'Iskof" should be employed for the University of Studies. "On the contrary, I am well aware that the benefice in question has since many years been administered by a special procurator in the name of the Congregation "Propaganda Fide" of Rome, and that the accounts up to 1823 have been duly rendered and approved in conformity to the supreme directions of His Holiness conveyed through the above mentioned Congregation; and that I am therefore under no obligation in the matter" (10).

The Director of Public Instruction E. Magro was of the opinion that the Archbishop's reply appeared to dispose of the whole matter. The Crown Advocate, however, did not agree; he considered the Archbishop's letter evasive. The Government archivist was asked to make enquiries in the Archives for the decree in question "in order that we may peruse it before going further into this matter, and see how it bears on the question" (11).

This decree was traced (12); by this decree which was given by His Holiness on 7 December 1795 on an application from the Grandmaster of the Order of St John of Jerusalem it was enacted (a) that the Rector *pro tempore* of the

benefice "Ta l'Iskof" should teach Arabic in the Malta University, (b) that on the benefice becoming vacant, the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, which was vested with the right of presentation to the benefice, should hold a competitive examination between the candidates to the benefice, and should appoint as Rector of the same "illum qui peritor in Lingua Arabica fuerit repertus", and (c) that the prizes assigned to the first students in the class of Arabic should only be awarded to those who have followed the whole curriculum of study of Arabic in the Malta University: "iis discipulis tantum tribuantur, qui toto anni curriculo in eadem universitate Linguae Arabicae scholam frequentant".

The decree was referred to the Crown Advocate who studied it alongside with the deed of Notary Francesco Calleja, dated 4 March, 1861. M. A. Refalo advised the Government on the matter on 7 June, 1919. He told the Lt. Governor not to pursue the issue any further since "this paper does not require any further action". The matter was therefore put away.

These were the Crown Advocate's remarks: "It appears that subsequently when a vacancy of the benefice occurred, owing to the lack of students of the Arabic Language in the Malta University, the aforesaid Congregation did not appoint a Rector with the obligation to teach that language and the rents of the benefice were allotted to the Sacred Missions until 1824, when the Directors of the same Congregation, having been duly authorised by the Holy See to that effect, transferred to the "Collegio Urbano" of Rome the class of Arabic which was formerly established at the Malta University. This information seems to tally with the concluding part of the Archbishop's letter of the 4 January, 1825 and to explain how the teaching of Arabic in the university did no longer remain an obligation attached to the said benefice but was carried out at public expense, as stated in the Chief Secretary's letter of the 3 January 1825." He concluded "that the Directors of the above mentioned Congregation as holders of the jus patronatus of the said benefice were legally in their right to dispose of the benefice as they did in 1824 with the sanction of the Holy See which is the Supreme Authority in the matters of ecclesiastical benefices" (13).

1. *Report of the Malta Financial Investigation Committee*, Malta, 13 November, 1909, para. 53.
2. *Ibid.*, para. 66.
3. *Malta e Sue Dipendenze*, 20 Marzo, 1913.
4. By V. Azzopardi, tipografia Giuseppe Camilleri e Co., Malta 1843.
5. For details see A. Cremona, "L'Antica Fondazione della Scuola di Lingua Araba in Malta", *Melita Historica*, 1955, vol. 1, nos. 3,4.
6. This benefice was conferred by the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of Faith by a competition usually held in Rome. For more details, see *Raccolta di varie cose*, p. 140.

7. The class of Arabic was transferred from the University to the Lyceum in accordance with a recommendation of the 1836 Royal Commission.
8. *Raccolta di varie cose*, p. 141.
9. *Abolition of Class of Arabic*, File, Lieutenant Governor, 2477/13, 26.6.1913, Inclusion 7.
10. *Ibid.*, Incl. 8.
11. *Ibid.*, Incl. of 25.8.1913.
12. *Ex Libro Concil. Status*, No. 275, f.36. "On the 7th day of March 1796, His Eminent Highness has ordered me, Prior of Ibernica, Fr. Francis Cartallio Pinto — vice chancellor, to register a decree of His Holiness relating to an obligation annexed to the Benefice known as 'ta l'Iscof' of teaching the Arabic Language to the public in this University of Studies. It runs as follows..." (translation).
13. File L.G. 2477/13.



On December 3, 1977, the Malta Historical Society organised a tour of Fort St. Angelo, under the guidance of Architect Michael Ellul. "A small castle, partly in ruins in 1524; strengthened and improved by successive Grand masters, and now the most imposing and best-preserved fort of them all. Its stone walls have admirably withstood the test of time". Picture shows the Chapel of St. Anne, built around the middle of the fifteenth century by the De Nava family, who were leaseholders of the castle at the time. (Photo by Mario Gauci)