

Book review

Stanley Fiorini, editor, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History: Part II: Documents in the State archives Palermo, No. 2, Cancellaria Regia: 1400-1459*, Malta University Press, 2004.

This massive volume of almost 800 pages is a continuation of the previously-published one which had covered the documentary material pertaining to the Maltese islands in the State archives of Palermo for the period 1259-1400. The *Documentary Sources of Maltese History* series, published by the University of Malta, is proving itself, over and over again, to merit the description of being of the most ambitious, important and scholarly publication projects ever embarked upon where our nation's past is concerned. Let us keep our fingers crossed that the necessary requisites in the form of hard-working researchers, funding and enthusiasm for the undertaking do not suffer a slow drying-up. The *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St John* comes to mind in this regard. The availability – or lack – of the essential tools of history in the form of published original documentation and of worthy descriptions of archival holdings is logically and inevitably reflected in the quality of published historical works. In this regard, we do deserve - at the turn of a new millennium and at such a momentous phase of our nation's development - better. We indeed deserve publications which move well away from what Prof. Victor Mallia-Milanes, General Editor of the series and Director of the newly-established Institute for Maltese Studies aptly describes in his foreword to the book as 'weird and mediocre, stifling and pedestrian, lifeless if not at times grotesque'. Providing the necessary tools for avoiding this constitutes one great fundamental requirement which needs to be nurtured and supported. Actually utilising such tools where available, a process which should really take place as a matter of course is, in reality, another issue crying out for attention. The extent to which, for instance, the veritable revolution in the interpretation of our medieval past has still to find its way in our school textbooks beggars belief. It is little wonder that for many, possibly the majority of Maltese, the school history textbook makes up their solitary, unwilling for and often downright boring encounter with their nation's past.

The documentation unearthed from the *Real Cancellaria* series of the Palermo State archive published in the volume covers the reigns of the Siculo-Aragonese and Castillian monarchs Martin the Younger (1392-1409) down to that of Alfonso the Magnanimous (1416-1458) and the first years of his successor and brother, Juan. A total of 618 documents are reproduced *in toto*, with each being preceded by a summary in English. An additional seven documents (619-625) from different local and foreign sources were included since these fill gaps in the *Cancellaria* series or in some way complement that source.

The sheer magnitude of new data made available through the publication of such

documentation will take some time to be wholly worked upon, interpreted and eventually made use of in scholarly publications focusing on pre-1530 Malta. The newly-available information varies from names of *Universit * and of other lay and religious office-holders, to warrants issued for the practice of different professions, from defence arrangements to ecclesiastical matters. As always in the case of newly-available medieval sources, the material is particularly valuable where Gozo is concerned since pre-1551 material is particularly scarce. The regular functioning of the Maltese and Gozitan *Universitates* during the first half of the 15th century is further confirmed and delved into. Aspects of Maltese late medieval history which are well-documented comprise the financial administration of the islands, notably the practice of guaranteeing the carrying-out of essential services – particularly those relating to defence – by allocating lands for their maintenance on a permanent basis. Interestingly, these included the services of *trabukerius*, that is the catapult-handler of the *castrum* as well as those of the royal falconers.

Besides shedding new light upon various general aspects of Maltese medieval history, some of the sources published refer to specific incidents, including the Monroy affair (1420-1427) and the subsequent Moorish invasion (1429). While the *Cancellaria* records do not contain much material regarding the Monroy affair, the royal practice of selling offices on the island both before and after 1429 emerges clearly and is in fact tabulated by the editor. New data pertaining to the 1429 invasion and the subsequent hardship it entailed is made available through a number of documents which refer to the ensuing devastation, lack of provisions and the outbreak of disease.

The publication of this vast mass of documentation is complemented by other material which helps both the specialist and lay reader to make the most of the *Cancellaria* treasure trove. Thus, tables providing data pertaining to land and land-related money grants (Table I), detailed updated lists of the holders of various offices in Malta and Gozo (Tables II to VIII) as well as others listing the revenues and expenses of the *Secretia* of both islands (Tables IX and X) are compiled and included. A bibliography and glossary are also provided. Particularly indispensable in a publication of this nature and size are the indexes provided, namely, separate thematic and chronological indexes of documents and indexes of persons, places and subjects.

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