

**SOME MINOR FIGURES CONNECTED WITH
THE MALTESE UPRISING AGAINST
THE FRENCH (1798-1800)**

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Sunday, 2 September 1798 is undoubtedly a milestone in Maltese History, not only because the practically unarmed Maltese peasants rose up against the French garrison, but also because of the various implications connected with this insurrection. Within a few hours of the commencement of the revolt, the Maltese were masters of Notabile and the countryside. This meant that the Maltese insurgents had to set up an alternative administration which, among its tasks, included that of directing and coordinating the national war effort against the French garrison which was blockaded within the maritime towns around Grand Harbour together with forts Manoel and Tigné.

The blockade which followed the uprising of September 1798 entailed a national war effort in which thousands of Maltese participated: either by enlisting in the twenty-one village battalions which were set up in the countryside¹ or by loaning sums of money for the maintenance of these armed forces.² Others freely gave their services on a national level.

An Efficient Administrator

The national war effort in the countryside, which was in full swing between 1798 and 1800, certainly demanded efficient and capable administrators. In this sphere, one encounters Lorenzo Bugeja of Rabat.

At the time of the outbreak of the insurrection, Bugeja was the Secretary of the

¹ ACM Misc. 136, *Notizie sul Blocco 1798*, f. 172r.

² For a list of persons who loaned money for the maintenance of the village battalions cf. NAM PS/01/3, *Brogliardo Ordini* 1.viii.1808 – 12.ii.1812, 280-323.

Confraternity of St Joseph at Rabat.³ On 4 September 1798, Bugeja was appointed Secretary by the Maltese administration established at Notabile and was also entrusted with *il dettaglio del Reggimento*.⁴ On the morrow, Bugeja was not only appointed *Turcopiliere o sia spettore delle torri e trinciere marittime del porto di San Paolo a Mare sino la costa del Ponente*,⁵ but he was also entrusted with carrying out the necessary repairs on the fortifications of Mdina, with the inspection of the fortifications in the countryside and with the organisation of the prisons.⁶

As Secretary of the Maltese Assembly, Bugeja was also entrusted with the task of distributing bread to the soldiers and to the refugees from the blockaded cities.⁷ Moreover, he also helped the national cause when musket cartridges were manufactured in his house.⁸

One of the problems facing the Maltese administration established in the countryside was that of obtaining provisions to feed the population. As provisions were scarce, Bugeja was entrusted with the task of obtaining supplies from Gozo at a time when the Portuguese had not as yet commenced the blockade of the French-held main Maltese harbours. Due to lack of foodstuffs in Malta, Bugeja twice went at night-time to Gozo, even in winter, to obtain supplies of corn and have them ferried over to Malta.⁹

3 Bugeja has left us a detailed account of the initial uprising and the subsequent capture of Notabile. Cf. NLM Lib. Ms. 269, ff. 38r-43r. In f. 41v Bugeja specifically states that he was the Secretary of the Confraternity of St Joseph.

4 A[rchive] of [S]t.[P]aul [G]rotto [R]abat, Ms. entitled *Blocco. Giornale de quanto è eseguito in Campagna dopo la Rivoluzione sino l'apertura delle porte li 9 Settembre 1800*.

5 ASPGR *Blocco*, under the section *Attestazioni Registrati nel Ufficio Giuratale della Notabile, 5.ix.1798*. Under this date, there is a document appointing Lorenzo Bugeja as *Turcopiliere*, signed by Emmanuele Vitale which includes the statement: 'atteso il zelo, la fedeltà, servitù del signor Lorenzo Bugeja prestati in vantaggio della Nazione in questi giorni entici ed attesa ancora la sua abilità ed affezione verso la patria'.

6 *Ibid.*, under the title *Giornale di quanto è eseguito in campagna 5.ix.1798*.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, under the title *Attestazioni Registrati nel Ufficio Giuratale del Notabile*, document signed by Emmanuele Vitale, 1.hi.1799.

9 *Ibid.*

In November 1798, Lorenzo Bugeja was nominated *Guardiano* of the harbour at St Paul's Bay,¹⁰ whilst in January 1800 he was also entrusted with the superintendence of the grain imported by the Università at Pwales and its subsequent destination to the various casals. To his credit, he performed both tasks with great efficiency.¹¹

Officers and Soldiers

With the French blockaded in Valletta, it was necessary to be on the alert and guard against the possibility of French sorties and assaults on the Maltese positions. For this purpose, batteries were set up at strategic posts such as at Tas-Samra in Hamrun, Marsa, Tal-Borg at Paola, Kordin and Tal-Gharghar together with the raising of twenty-one battalions.¹²

Hundreds of Maltese enlisted in these battalions and gave their services to the country. Amongst the officers and men who served during that turbulent period one encounters Giovanni Andrea Trevisan, Gaetano Balzan, Giovanni Francesco Theuma Castelletti, Andrea Naudi, Giuseppe Grech, Mario Grasso and Giovanni Mifsud.

Giovanni Andrea Trevisan took part in the assault and capture of Notabile, and was wounded in his right hand. Three days later on 6 September 1798, he directed the attack on the powder magazine at Kordin, during which he was wounded once more. Trevisan was also present during the attack on Valletta from Marsamuscetto

10 *Ibid.*, under *Annotazione IV*, document appointing Bugeja 'Guardiano del Porto di San Paolo a Mare', 15.xi.1798.

11 *Ibid.*, under *Annotazione XXXIX 18.ix.1800*, and *Annotazione XL 14.ix.1800*. In the years after the successful outcome of the blockade, on 10 November 1808 Bugeja was appointed Storekeeper of the Università of Valletta 'in considerazione dei servigi da lui prestati durante il blocco'. Cf. NAM, *Segreteria del Governo, Registro Impieghi 1.viii.1808 - 5.vii.1811*, p. 5. On 4 April 1815, Bugeja was elected Rector of the Confraternity of St Joseph at Rabat. He passed away in harness on 7 November 1818, aged 76 years. Cf. G. Xerri, *Arciconfraternità di San Giuseppe Rabat* (Malta, 1936), 35 and 63.

12 ACM Misc. 136, f. 72r.

Harbour on 25 November 1798, and during the attacks on Fort San Salvatore and Senglea, in January 1799, during which he was again wounded.¹³

Gaetano Balzan was the *Capo di Battaglione* at Siggiewi at the time of the French invasion. Throughout the blockade, he served for two years without any salary at the *Campo Generale di San Giuseppe*, and was also present during several engagements with the enemy.¹⁴

Giovanni Francesco Theuma Castelletti and Andrea Naudi gave their services in the Mdina-Rabat-Dingli battalion under the command of Notary Emmanuele Vitale. Theuma Castelletti held the rank of Captain whilst Naudi was a Lieutenant in the company commanded by Theuma Castelletti.¹⁵ Together with other soldiers of the Mdina battalion, Naudi was frequently stationed at the strategic post of Kordin where he performed guard duties. He also gave his services to the battalion of Casal Luqa.¹⁶

Giuseppe Grech served for eight months at the Tal-Gharghar battery as *sotto capo di canone*. He also served at Kordin with the battalion of Casal Zabbar and at the *Campo Generale di San Giuseppe*.¹⁷ Mario Grasso, who left Valletta at the beginning of the blockade, settled at Qormi and enlisted as a volunteer in the village

13 NAM Petitions O'Ferrall, Vol. 9. After the blockade, Trevisan served as a Lieutenant in the Militia and as Captain in the Provincial Corps. On 12 April 1805, he was commissioned Lieutenant in the Royal Regiment of Malta. He served in Sicily and was present during the siege of Sulla at Calatna. At Capri he was captured by the French but he escaped from prison. During the plague outbreak of 1813-4, Sir Hildebrand Oakes entrusted him to take charge of Valletta and Marsamussetto Harbour, with the superintendence of the lazarettos and the burial of the dead. Between 7 November 1815 and 31 March 1838 he served as First Clerk in the office of the Marine Police. He died in 1838.

14 NAM Petitions O'Ferrall, Vol. 2. After the blockade, Balzan held the rank of Captain in the Militia and was also *Ajutante di Polizia* at Siggiewi, Qrendi and Mqabba.

15 NAM Petitions O'Ferrall, Vol. 8. G.F. Theuma Castelletti was the son of Count Ferdinand Theuma Castelletti who was elected one of the four Maltese deputies on the outbreak of the insurrection.

16 *Ibid.*

17 NLM Univ. 493, Petitions (1788-1802), attestation dated 14 September 1800 signed by Vincenzo Borg and Fr Antonio Manscè.

battalion without any remuneration. He also served in the *Trinciere della Marsa in tutte le occorrenze*.¹⁸

Giovanni Mijsud also served throughout the blockade at the Tal-Gharghar battery. In an attestation signed by Vincenzo Borg, the representative of Birkirkara and the commandant at Tal-Gharghar, it is stated that *il suddetto Mijsud trovandosi un giorno a far fuoco con altri suoi compagni contro la guardin avanzata dei Francesi si rovescio addosso un musco, con una canonata tirata dai Francesi*.¹⁹

Doctors and Surgeons

The services of doctor and surgeons were badly needed in the countryside during the blockade, not only to attend to the needs of the wounded soldiers, but also because during the first quarter of 1799, the countryside was practically paralysed by a fever. During this difficult period, Doctors Salvatore Bernard, Antonio Muscat, Francesco Scicluna and Gregorio Saydon, together with the surgeon Francesco Caruana, selflessly gave their services in the countryside.

Dr Salvatore Bernard was the *Medico Primario della Città Notabile*. During the blockade, he not only gave his services free of charge, but also established quarantine regulations. He gave his services to those who went for medical assistance at the two Rabat hospitals of Santo Spirito and Saura where his patients included Maltese, Neapolitan and Portuguese soldiers.²⁰ Dr Antonio Muscat, who prior to the French invasion was one of the doctors of the Order's naval squadron, gave his ser-

18 NLM Univ. 455, *Attorum 1802*, f. 51v, attestation dated 25 October 1799, signed by Stanislao Gatt, *Rappresentante della Città Pinto*. After the blockade, by letter dated 9 September 1807 signed by Alexander Macaulay Public Secretary, Mario Grasso was informed that he had been accepted and granted recognition as Vice-Consul for Austria. Cf. *idem*, f. 49r.

19 NLM Univ. 495, Petitions (1806-1807), attestation dated 22 January 1809 signed by Vincenzo Borg.

20 NLM Univ. 90, *Mandati 1781-1801*, 10 April 1801. In 1801 Dr Salvatore Bernard was awarded a gratuity of 150 scudi 'in remunerazione di varii servigi prestati gratis nella passata rivoluzione'.

vices at Tas-Samra Battery and its advanced posts as *chirurgo*, paymaster and second-in-command.²¹

The *Medico dei Poveri* of Senglea, Dr Francesco Scicluna, left Senglea in March 1799 with the idea of proceeding to Gozo. However, at the request of the Maltese Congress, he remained in the Maltese countryside where there was a dire need of medical personnel. Here he daily attended to the needs of the sick in the villages of Naxxar, Birkirkara, Lija, Attard and Balzan.²² Another medical practitioner, Dr Gaetano Saydon, settled at Żurrieq during the blockade; here he gave his services free of charge to the village battalion,²³ while the *chirurgo* of Senglea, Francesco Caruana, gave his services as *chirurgo* to the battalion of Casal Tarxien and also to the soldiers who were stationed in the nearby batteries of Kordin and Tal-Borg in Paola.²⁴

In this communication, I have mentioned just thirteen individuals who gave their services to their country during the two-year turbulent period of the French blockade. They are certainly only a small fraction of the many thousands who rose to the occasion and donated their services at that time. Further research will certainly help us to assess the various contributions given by so many other individuals.

21 NAM Petitions O'Ferrall, Vol. 6, *Elenco dei servizi del defunto Antonio Muscat M.D.* After the blockade, Dr Muscat served as *Assistente Chirurgo* in the Civil and Military Hospitals for three years, and he also enlisted as an ensign in the local garrison for eight years till 1811. He later served as *chirurgo* at the dockyard and at the district of Cospicua. In 1842, he held the post of *Medico e Chirurgo della Polizia* in the Three Cities, and in 1841 he was appointed *Medico dei Poveri* at Cospicua.

22 NLM Univ. 494, Petitions (1802-1807). Dr Scicluna had held the post of *Medico dei Poveri* at Senglea since 1798. After the blockade, he again held this same post at Senglea. He died in harness on 4 November 1810. Cf. NLM, Univ. 477, *Mandati*, 8 February 1811.

23 NLM Univ. 444, *Actorum (1801-1802)*, ff. 27r and 27v. After the blockade, on 30 October 180, Dr Saydon was appointed *Medico dei Poveri* at Cospicua.

24 NLM Univ. 445, f. 25v. After the blockade, Francesco Caruana was appointed *Chirurgo dei Poveri* at Senglea. Cf. NLM, Univ. 448, *Mandati*, 9 March 1807.