THE ARCHIVES OF PALERMO AND MALTESE MEDIEVAL HISTORY:
A FIRST REPORT *

Since the government of the islands of Malta and Sicily for the whole of the Middle Ages was subject to that of Sicily, inevitably one expects the central government archives at the Archivio di Stato, Palermo, to be of vital importance to the Maltese medieval historian. Their significance was fully recognized in Malta back in the seventeenth century, and the early erudite historians and antiquarians like Commendatore G. F. Abela made full use of such transcripts as came their way of documents preserved in that depositary at Palermo (1). However, little progress has been made. Massive collections of documents originating from the administration at Palermo were built up during the eighteenth century, but hardly any evidence survives of purposive historical research at the Palermo archives concerning Malta and Gozo right down to the present century (2). Reputable historians like Mons. A. Mifsud and Roberto Valentini utilized the hitherto largely untapped local resources and did nothing about Palermo (3). Occasionally, documents concerning Malta and Gozo were published by foreigners, mostly as part of large collections of documents (4). Henri Bresc’s recent study on the Secrezia of Malta during the Late Middle Ages was the first major study based almost solely on Palermo documentation (5).

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1. In particular, NLM, Univ. 206, but several others as well.
3. The articles and documents published by A. Mifsud are to be found mainly dispersed through local publications like Archivum Maltae et La Dioces Di Malta; those of R. Valentini are mainly in Archivio Storico di Malta published in Rome.
4. G. Cusumano, Codice diplomatico di Federico III d’Aragona re di Sicilia (1335-1377) (Palermo, 1885); F. Lionti, Codice diplomatico di Alfonso il Magnanimo (Palermo, 1891); G. Silvestri, I capitoli di Giovanni Luca Barbieri (Palermo, 1879, 1886, 1888) all published in full or calendar form documents found in the Palermo State Archives concerning Malta. With them one can also add B. and G. Logennico, Codice diplomatico dei giudici di Sicilia (Palermo, 1884) and others.
Towards the end of the eighteenth century the notorious Abate Vella published a long series of spurious documents concerning Sicily as well as Malta during the Muslim period (6), an enterprise which deservedly cost him several years of imprisonment but which has confused generations of historians (7). It should be realized that no archival documentation for the Muslim period on Malta or Gozo has survived anywhere. Nor is this surprising since nothing more than the merest fragments of such documentation have survived for any other country during that period (8). However, Sicily does have a small number of plans or lists of serfs on land donated to ecclesiastical institutions going back to Norman times (9). They are written in Arabic and Greek, and are immensely long, one of them extending to no less than seven metres. Only one piece is in the State Archives of Palermo, but microfilm copies of others can be consulted there and photo-copies made. For Maltese studies they are highly interesting because of the considerable light they shed on Maltese medieval nomenclature, whether surnames, nicknames or place-names. They were inadequately published a century ago by Salvatore Cusa (10), but Maltese scholars have remained completely unaware of their contents and importance because the Public Library at Valletta failed to acquire a copy. At least six of the serfs thus documented seem to have had some kind of connection with Malta and two others with Gozo:


Among the traditional Maltese surnames appearing among the names of these serfs of Norman Sicily, most of them Muslim, one finds:

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Summat</th>
<th>Carren</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abu Bakr</td>
<td>Hida</td>
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<tr>
<td>Busaileul</td>
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<td>Fera</td>
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<td>Borg</td>
<td>Tobbe</td>
<td>Gharb</td>
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<td>Borggiun</td>
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<td>Tabone</td>
<td>Tobbe</td>
<td>Gharb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agius</td>
<td>Tobbe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fillet</td>
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<td>Gharb</td>
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<td>Zammit</td>
<td>Xerri</td>
<td>Xerri</td>
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<td>Sultana</td>
<td>Quet</td>
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<td>Ghotman bia</td>
<td>Miatilha</td>
<td>Miatilha</td>
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<td>brother</td>
<td>Miatilha</td>
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The tabular, collections of mostly notarial documents concerning property rights put together by religious corporations suppressed soon after the Unification of Italy, spanning the whole Norman and later medieval periods, contain some 6361 documents (12). A couple of them concerning Malta and Gozo have been recently published by H. Bresc in Melita Historica (13). Others have been published from seventeenth and eighteenth century transcripts in these

12. Ministéro per i beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archieva- tici, Tiberius Archivistici Italiani: Sicilia, p.7.
archives (14) or in the manuscript collections of the Biblioteca Comunale di Palermo (15). The possibility of further discoveries of similar documents in such collections is evident but entails laborious research and the proportion of documentation that is relevant to the history of Malta must be minimal. The same can also be said about the vast collection of notarial registers in the State Archives of Palermo (16). Any find would, however, be correspondingly important, especially if it antedated 1400.

The main and most fruitful series of registers belonging to the medieval government of Sicily, those of the Real Cancelleria and the Protonotario, begin to contain anything about Malta soon after 1350. They suffer from serious gaps down to 1392, but almost every volume of both series after that date contains something about Malta and it is impossible here to do more than indicate the wealth of information thus available to the historian. The present writer has examined almost every register of the Real Cancelleria down to 1530, but only some twenty registers of the parallel series Del Protonotario have been examined (17).

Of fundamental importance in the study both of the local administration of Malta and Gozo as well as that of family influence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are the yearly appointments to municipal offices in the two islands (18). These had to be registered both in the Real Cancelleria and sixteenth centuries are the yearly appointments to municipal offices in the two islands (18). These had to be registered both in the Real Cancelleria and the Protonotario, but about a third seem to have missed registration in the former during the fifteenth century. Most of the missing ones may yet be found in the latter, but the two series overlap so much that examining both is highly tedious and conducive to a considerable duplication of results.

The long series of capitoli published by Giambruno and Genuardi down to 1458 can, of course, be extended right down to 1530 by means of the entries in the Real Cancelleria registers, but all the capitoli concerning Malta are still available in Maltese archives in the original or in official copy form (19). Still it has been possible to discover three hitherto unknown capitoli belonging to the island of Gozo (20).

Defence and the provision of wheat have a prominent place in these registrations, the latter disappointingly usually merely wheat for the use of the garrison of St. Angelo or the disposal of redundant wheat belonging to the Crown, the former frequently consisting of the appointment of bombardiers and other garrison men or the dispatch and provisioning of vessels sent with relieving forces to the island in times of invasion, both frequently duplicated by entries in the Lettere Vicerregie. Neither the one nor the other type gives much away in the way of global statistics of wheat importation or the size of relieving forces. Thus the relieving force of 1429 is illustrated by documentation concerning the dispatch of individual ships as well as by interesting details concerning the design of the flag carried by the relieving army but no other more significant detail or whether and when the force actually arrived in Malta (21). Occasionally some information is given about the new armaments sent to Fort St. Angelo and the cost of repairs to the walls, but hardly ever about the nature of the repairs or the extensions (i.e. the fortifications. Details are given about the Viceroy's visits of 1485 and 1492 but only about the ships accompanying their trips not about the problems which he tackled during stay in Malta.

The Real Cancelleria, like the Protonotario, is particularly rich in the documentation of royal grants of land, feudal or otherwise. Of course, the transfer or land between private individuals is not registered in these sources. Nor do the latter contain anything about the lands of the Church except for...
the rare gifts of Crown land to ecclesiastical institutions. In fact ecclesiastical affairs are only represented by (a) occasional collations to royal benefices including some of the highest appointments in the cathedral, (b) documentation of the administration of the temporalities of the Maltese diocese during vacancies, and (c) the occasional grants of favours from the Crown requested by the bishop. This paucity of documentation, though entirely in the nature of things, is particularly unfortunate since the medieval ecclesiastical archives of the archdiocese of Palermo, which could be expected to contain court proceedings on appeal from the church courts of Malta, have reportedly not survived their accidental involvement in the fighting of the Garibaldi era.

The in-fighting between the leading three or four families of Malta, as it is reflected in the continual disputes between the castellan, the secreto and the town mayor of Mdina, gets frequent mention, usually manifesting itself in the non-payment by the secreto of the salaries of the soldiers garrisoning St. Angelo commanded by the castellan and in jurisdictional disputes between the latter and the town mayor. The frequent marriage alliances between them merely added another element to the causes of their never-ending quarrels and mutual recriminations but these are documented elsewhere.

A large proportion of the viceregal letters to the town officials of Malta and Gozo were sent in answer to private petitions and complaints, requests for favours, and applications. Much biographical information is thus added to what is available in Malta both for important personages like the fief holders and professional men like Pietro Caxaro and for the merest peasant or even his wife or widow who dared complain to the King's officials at Palermo of abuses and injustices allegedly committed by powerful men on the island. The permission to doctors and notaries to practise their profession is regularly entered in the Real Cancelleria registers, and occasionally an agreement for the employment of the town grammar schoolmaster is also recorded.

Several documents concern persons who were exiled to Malta from Sicily and others from Malta exiled to the larger island, a subject almost completely unrecorded in the surviving Maltese archives themselves, but which has aroused some interest owing to the misreading of a passage from Dante which seemed to refer to the use of Malta as a prison by its medieval rulers (22). Though

21. Dante, Paradiso, IX, 52-54: 'Piangerk Paltro ancora la disfalta/Dell'empio suo pastor, che non scorda/ai, che per simil non s'entrn in Malta. /G. Siebenhauser-Vivanti, Dizionario della Divina Commedia (Firenze, 1936), s.v. Malta: "prigione speciale per ecclesiastici colpevoli di gravi reati, che si trovava a Bolsena. Secondo altri, prigione in generale buia e fangosa.'

22. An interesting subject, even if for the traditional historian merely of marginal importance, is that of the capture and dispatch to the King himself of falcons and other birds of prey (25). This is pretty closely documented almost throughout the period 1400-1530, and a study of it should arouse the interest at least of ornithologists and those historians who belong to the wholst school of history, and possibly also of the general public.

Among the most important documents of the Real Cancelleria are those recording the granting of Malta and Gozo as a county or marquisate during the last years of the fourteenth century. They have long been known to Sicilian historians who have taken them into account in their histories of Sicily during the time of the tyrants (26), but Maltese historians have so far had to rely on their reports of what they contain. An interesting study would involve a comparison or contrast of these documents with those concerning the pawning of Malta on Monroy in 1421 (27).

Special notice should be taken of the profuse new documentation on Gozo, an island reputed to have lost all its medieval archives, administrative, notarial and ecclesiastical, during the 1505 assault of the Turks. The Real Cancelleria and presumably the Protonotario registers contain not only a large proportion of the sets of town officials of the post-1400 period paralleling those of Malta, but also a surprisingly large number of other documents concerned with rough
ly the same subjects as have been indicated for Malta since Gozo had a separate municipal organization.

Other series of registers like the Lettere Viceregie and the Conservatoria di Registri have also been sampled. The former are particularly rich in material on both Maltese islands but a large proportion duplicates the entries in the Real Cancelleria series. The Conservatoria registers suffer from the fact that a large number of their entries are of a recurring nature, such as annual payments from the royal revenues.

Working back in Malta on the abundant documentation obtained in this manner, however, has had its drawbacks. By perforce ignoring all the stuff not directly and solely concerned with Malta and Gozo material of vital importance for the full understanding of the period would be neglected. Thus the capitoli del Regno are as applicable to Malta as to any other place in the Sicilian kingdom, but it is not practicable to examine and secure photo­copies of each one; for them one has to fall back on Testa’s monumental publication (not available in Malta). Inevitably, however, the Maltese historian is (correctly) tempted to obtain copies of a few non-Maltese documents which could serve to broaden his understanding by way of comparison. Thus one might include a document referring to the lack of rain at Agrigento occurring at the same time that Malta lacked rain for three consecutive years, or the contract of engagement of a schoolmaster by the town authorities of the same Sicilian town. In addition, documents concerning the De Nava family abroad, in Pantelleria and elsewhere, must certainly attract the Maltese historian who, also, cannot do without such background material as he can find on important personages like Monroy who seem to enter into Maltese history unannounced to fade away again without anyone knowing anything about their antecedents or later history. But it is not possible to include more than a few such documents. In evaluating his Malta and Gozo documents the historian therefore has to keep this handicap in mind and find a remedy as best as he may.

APPENDIX

I

Reimbursement by the King's financial officers of the money paid at the king's verbal request by David Subiti, secretus of the city of Palermo (a) for the cost of upkeep of the crew of a Venetian vessel which had been detained at Palermo for refusing to join in the relief of Malta, and (b) for the payment he made to the painter Nicolao de Sens for the two banners and pennon he had painted for the army preparing to relieve Malta, 1 February 1430. (ASP. Tribunal del Regio Patrimonio, Lettere Viceregie, vol. 2, f.149v)

Alfonso etc.

Viceréges etc. Nobilibus eiusdem regni Sicilie magistris racionalibus et conservatori etc. Quia David Subiti etc. ad mandatum nostrum ibi ortenas factum de pecunia regie curie dicit sui officij annj presentis solvit et expendit pro causis subscriptias videlicet pro pane, case, tonnina, vino, carnibus et herbis emptis a diversis personis per manus Tuchj Salera pro substantiactione xxij personarum de navj magná Venetiarum tunc existente in portu Panormi cera­cerearum in sacro palacio dicte urbis ubi steterunt diebus xij et ex eo quia patronus dicte navis recusabat eandem navem nauizare pro eundo in succur­sum civitatis Melliveti tunc obesse per hostes Jnfielidj vnciam j tarenos xviij granos vij; Item magistro Nicolao de Sens pictorj pro duobus vexillis vno depicto ad arma sancti ieorgij et alio ad arma regia et pro vno pinnono pro tubicine nostro ad opus armate que ire parata erat in succursum predictum, computatis cindato, tela sarcis, serico et magisterio vncias ilij tarenos xviij granos x ascendentes ad summam vnciarum vj tarenorum ilij granorum xxij prout apparat per quinque apocas manu notari Jacobi de Marco apresentatas magne curie racionum et Jnde dicto secreto restituatats sui raciocinij tempore produ­cendas M. v. expresse quatenus eidem secreto dictas vncias vj tarenos ilij granos xviij in exitu sue racionis computate et admetere restituire presentes et oppridi­cipiata sine dubio penitus debeat. Data Panormi 10 Frebuarj viij Indi­cijons (1430). Nicolao de Specijalj. Gullemus de Muntayans.

Post datam insignatam declaramus vobis quod dicta duo vexilla recepinamus Nos predictus Gullemus nomine regie curie et ecat dictum pinnonum...

II

Reimbursement by the King's financial officers of the money paid at the king's verbal request by David Subiti, secretus of the city of Palermo for the making of a banner to be used by the army preparing to relieve Malta, then besieged by the Infidels, 8 March 1430. (ASP. Tribunal del Regio Patrimonio, Lettere Viceregie, vol. 2, fol. 150v)

Alfonso etc.

Viceréges etc. Nobilibus eiusdem regni magistris racionalibus et conserva­
tori etc. Quia David Subtili secretus et magister procurator felicitatis urbis Panormi ad mandatum nostrum sibi oretenus factum de pecunia regiae curiae dicti suæ officij annœ presentis solvit et expendit pro fieri faciendo quodam vexillo cum imagine crucifixi ad opus armatum in succursum Meliveti tunc obsesse per hostes infideles vncias tres et tarenos xxvj hoc modo videlem Symonij de Branchis mercatorij pro cannis tribus cindatis chiléstri de Florencia ad rationem tarenorum xxvj prœ qualibet canna vncias iij tarenos xxj et magistro Gisparj pictorij pro picture dicti vexilli computatis auro et coloribus vncias j tarenos vj mandamus vobis quatenus in exito rationis dicte secretie annœ presentis dictas vncias tres tarenos xxvj restituitis presentibus et apoda dictorum Symonis et magistri Gisparj acceptare et admicere pentitus declarantes dictum vexillum fore in manibus nostri predictij Guillelmi Muntayans consignatum per eundem secretum nomine dicte regiae curiae. Data Panormi viij Marsei viij Judiconis.
Guillelmuus de Muntayans

Nicolaus de Speciali