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GIOVANNI FRANCESCO ABELA'S LEGACY
TO THE JESUIT COLLEGE

Introduction

It would have been much more appropriate if this paper had been given in last year's History Week but at the time the idea of it had not yet been conceived. 1982 marked the fourth centenary of the birth of Giovanni Francesco Abela who was born in Valletta in the year 1582, barely 17 years after that most notable and noble event in Maltese history, the Great Siege of Malta by the Turks (1). However, though the latter event was deservedly commemorated, not the slightest commemoration was, to my knowledge, made in celebration of the birth of this distinguished Maltese forebear. No stamp was issued. No publication compiled in his honour, as had been done in 1955, on the occasion of the centenary of his death (2).

Nonetheless, Abela is still revered as one of the greatest personalities that left their mark on the history of the Maltese islands. Given the minute size of this nation, the stature of this great man gains further in monumentality. His achievement as the first Maltese historian has been recognized both locally and abroad. His work is still an important source of first-hand information on a number of subjects of Maltesia, such as folklore, placenames, the Maltese language, history and archaeology. His Description of the Maltese Islands (3) was translated into Latin by G.A. Seinero in 1725, Latin being the universal language of science and culture of that time. This translation was incorporated in Graefe's Thesaurus antiquitatum et historiarum Italicarum (4).

Abela's personal attainment after his education in Malta and abroad is not a negligible one. He became Auditor of Grand Master de Paula, Chaplain and finally Vice Chancellor of the Order of Saint John, an extremely prominent

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2. E. V. Leopardi et al., Gian Francesco Abela, Essays in his honour by members of the "Malta Historical Society" on the occasion of the Third Centenary of his death (1655-1915), Malta 1965.
3. G. F. Abela, Della Descrittione di Malta, Isola nel Mar Siciliano con le sue Antichita, ed altre Notizie, Malta 1647.
status in an institution which admitted far too few men of Maltese origin (5).

He is also remembered as the promoter of the first Notarial Archives for Malta (6). But it is Abela the antiquarian, the collector of, and commentator on ancient objects that concerns this brief paper. The word 'antiquarian', one must admit, implies negative, outdated attitudes disdained by modern academic institutions and scientific approach (7). But Abela was an antiquarian in the positive sense. He was a pioneer, a precursor in the study of Maltese antiquities. He was an architect to the nation's heritage (9).

Abela's unrefrained prejudice against pagan religions (readily condoned in his sacred works) and, on the other hand, a sure sign of 'anti-Malta' nationalism, that he is the first Maltese collector of antiquities known to us, even though he certainly did collect objects which he thought to be ancient. In this respect he is the first Maltese collector of antiquities known to us, even though a century earlier the Frenchman Quintinus declared to have in his possession an ancient Maltese coin with the Greek legend MELITAION (20). We Maltese should be more grateful for Abela's efforts in this field since his personal collection of antiquities was destined to form the nucleus around which our nation's collection of archaeological objects, the National Museum of Archaeology, was to develop (21).

The first step in this direction was taken by Abela in 1637 when, at the age of 55, he bequeathed to the College of the Jesuit Fathers in Valletta the perpetual administration and usufruct of his house and garden on the hill called 'ta Corin' in the Marsa harbour (22). This was done by means of a deed of a rather complex nature which today constitutes the core of a group of documents connected with this bequest preserved in the National Library of Malta (23). The manuscript in question is no doubt the original deed for it

Dokiena (16), and rightly interpreted the toponym Misakfa (Imsaqqfa) as referring to 'una grande pietra, sollevata da terra, et allogiata sopra d'altre non men grandi', that is, a dolmen (17).

Perhaps the worst aspects of the antiquarian in Abela come to the fore in such interpretations as those attributing the impressive prehistoric buildings of Malta to a race of giants which, in his view and in that of his contemporaries, had inhabited the Maltese islands (18). Hagar Qim, in fact, is described as nothing less than 'rovine tutte d'un edificio de' Giganti' (19).

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22. Later known as Jesuits Hill, today covered to a great extent by the Electricity Generating Station.
23. N.L.M. Treasury A, Ms. 115, ff. xii-xviii. Transcripts also in Treasury A, Ms. 114, ff.15, 205+206v. I am very much indebted to Dr. G. Wettiger for his precious help in my search for these documents.
carries Abela's own signature and the seal of the Grand Master (24). The seal bears the effigy of Grand Master Joannes Paulus Lascaris Castellar in three-quarter view (25). The seven page document is written on an extremely fine quality and beautifully preserved parchment which on one side has assumed an attractive golden patina.

**Brief Description of Documents**

The Jesuit Fathers appear to have been entrusted with the safekeeping of the original document since the group to which it belongs is bound in the first of three volumes constituting the "Acta Collegii Melitensis Soc. Jesu" (26). The group contains, in this order, the following documents all of which were to be found among the deeds of Notary Michele Ralli:

1. Donation, dated 10 July 1627, of a "clausura di terra" on the hill 'tal-Cortin" by Abela to the Conventual Church of the Order of St. John. The deed contains also a copy in Italian of Abela's petition ('supplica') which had been presented to the Council of the Order on 6 November 1626, (27)

2. The main document which constitutes the original contract by which Abela donated the perpetual administration and usufruct of the same property to the Jesuits' College. The document consists of:
   a) a preamble in Italian dated 1 October 1637;
   b) a copy of the petition in Latin made to the Council of the Order for permission to change the dispositions of the previous (1627) donation so that i. the usufruct be given to the Jesuits; ii. a piece of land be added to the 'viridarium' for the construction of a chapel; and iii. the property should remain in the possession of the Capitola di S. Giacomo in the same Conventual Church;
   c) the forwarding of the petition by the Grand Master on 10 June 1637;
   d) a favourable decision taken by the Council of the Order on 19 June 1637;
   e) the consent given by the Grand Master on 18 September 1637 on the Papal authority given by means an Apostolic Brief;

24. Consequently, this document can be used to compare the autograph manuscripts in the National Library attributed to Abela: see A. Luttrell, "Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: tradition and invention in Maltese historiography" Melita Historica, VII, no. 2, 1977, pp.106-107, notes 4-6.
25. Unfortunately the upper part of the head, including the left ear, and the lower part of the chest, showing the eight-pointed cross of the Order, are missing.

**Motivations, Conditions and Obligations**

The motivation behind the original (1627) legacy is given as Abela's desire to express his gratitude towards the Venerable Langue of Castille and Portugal. Its purpose was to keep alight day and night the lamp of the Chapel of San Giacomo in the Conventual Church of St John. The usufruct of the bequeathed property was to be enjoyed by Abela in his lifetime, and after that by only two of his relatives (to be named later) and then by the Vicerechancellor or Regent of the Order's Chancellory with the perpetual obligation of paying 10 gold scudi and 14 tari' to the Procurator of the Langue of Castille and Portugal for the upkeep of the same lamp, as well as the rent due to the Grand Master on the property in Paula which was also included in the bequest. The property was to be kept in good state and the three coats of arms and inscriptions, which the deed describes as being affixed above the doors of the buildings, were to be conserved in their place, never to be removed. Not only that, if they were ever to be destroyed by accident or eroded, the administrators were to restore them at their own expense.

The last condition was that for no reason whatsoever should the property be disposed of otherwise than stated. In the last extreme the administration and usufruct of the property were to fall in the hands of the Prior of the Conventual Church. When, ten years later, Abela wanted to change the dispositions of this legacy he needed special permission not only from the Order, but also from the Pope.

It should be noted that no mention of antiquities is made in the 1627 document. Abela's reasons for wanting to change these dispositions are described vaguely as 'alcune giuste cause' in his petition of 1637 and were accepted as such by the Papal authorities. They are laid out in detail in the text of the...
the usufruct of the Casino, are named as being the Chierico Don Eugenio was equivalent to the imposition of obligations with others. It will of the Jesuit Fathers, being certain that with them a simple request Aeternam for his soul. Which requests Abela left to the discretion and good them to dedicate all the Masses they would celebrate in the Oratory of the Order. The two relatives, whom Abela was supposed to designate as heirs to the donor expected some favours of a spiritual nature (33). He humbly asked the Fathers to pray His Divine Majesty to have mercy on his soul and forgive him his sins; above all to assist him at his death-bed with their presence and devotions until he gave up his spirit to the Creator. He also requested them to dedicate all the Masses they would celebrate in the Oratory of the Guardian Angel he was about to build in the garden, for his soul and for the remission of his sins, and to remember to recite occasionally a Requiem Mass in perpetuity for his soul and orders that these objects should be kept by the Reverend Fathers, being certain that with them a simple request was equivalent to the imposition of obligations with others.

The transfer of the administration and usufruct was due to take effect immediately after the benefactor's death (whereas in the original legacy it had to follow the death of his two relatives). Meanwhile they were to be enjoyed by Abela himself. The 'proprieta' and 'dominio' of the house and garden were to remain forever with the Cappella di San Giacomo, and therefore, with the Jesuit Fathers (34). The Council of the Order decided in favour of the bequest, a similar description is given in that language followed by a description of the confining properties (37). Furthermore, among the obligations of the administration the deed specifies the preservation of the buildings already constructed or about to be constructed in the said "clausura Tal Cortin", on the doors of which were affixed the coats of arms of Grand Master Antonio de Paula, of the Langue of Castille and Portugal, and of the donor himself, together with a marble plaque with a Latin inscription commemorating the event, that is, the bequest of the property (38). In his petition of 1637 to the Council of the Order Abela requests permission to give the land at Paula, which formed part of the original legacy, to the Chapel of St Trophimus in the Church of St Francis under the title of Santa Maria di Gesù in Valletta, and in exchange to add an equivalent piece of land to the viridarium, on which he intended to build a 'cappelletta ossia oratorio' to be able to say Mass in it whenever the need arose. This oratorio would after his death be administered by the Jesuit Fathers with the obligation of praying perpetually the Divine Majesty for the happiness and prosperity of the Grand Master and of the Order (39). This land adjacent to the viridarium

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30. Ibid., f. xiv: "da i quali essendo minore, ho ricevuto le prime introduzioni e documenti si alle Virtù con alle Lettere".
31. Abela, Descrittione, p.i:7: "In honore della veneranda antiquiti e per soddisfazione de curiosi amici e professori di etia".
32. N.L.M. Treasury A, Ms. 115, f. xvii: "se si possono dell i detti giardino e casa cavar fuori, ne dar cosa alcuna a persone che sia sotto qualunque pretore".
33. Ibid., f. xviii.
34. Ibid., ff. xvii-xviii.
35. Ibid., f. xiv.
36. Ibid., f. xiii.
37. Ibid., f. xiiv. A topographical feature with a possible archaeological significance was a quarry ("Latomia") which limited the property on the south.
38. Ibid., f. xiiiv.
39. Ibid., f. xvi.
consisted of two properties, one he had already bought and the other he was about to buy (40).

Besides viridarium, casino, casa e giardino and other designations accompanied by the specification 'Ta Cortin', this property at Marsa is often denominated 'of San Giacomo' because it came to belong to the chapel of that saint at St John's Cathedral. In the Papal Brief of 30 July 1637, in fact, it appears about to buy (40).

The original purpose of my research into the Biblioteca manuscripts, as well as those in other collections, in the National Library of Malta was to establish a detailed list of the antiquities in Abela's possession at the time of his death on 4th May 1655 in order to discover which items can still be traced in the present national collection and which others have been dispersed. In this respect the results of my search have been somewhat disappointing.

The very last item in the group of documents extracted from the acts of Notary Michael Ralli, all connected with Abela's legacy of his villa in Marsa, is a Memoria delle case che lasciò nel Gabinetto il Fra J. Francesco Habela nel Cortin (42). The list in it is, however, far from exhaustive. It is extremely vague and leaves out, among other things, the coins which are documented elsewhere (43). The objects that are listed are the following:-

- The marble statue of Hercules
- 3 gilt glass vases
- 3 small glass vases with lids
- 14 gilt Murcia dishes
- 25 frames (quadretti) with different curious figures
- 4 clay vases painted (favorit) in red and black
- 6 small porcelain plates
- 20 ordinary table plates in terracotta
- 1 Egyptian mummy head
- 1 branch of unworked coral
- 1 box (vedere) of a small elephant, 2 palmi long
- Various small idols, oil-lamps and small ancient perfume bottles (vasetti lacrimatori) found in ancient tombs.

The definite article used with the first item leaves no doubt as to which statue of Hercules meant. This statue had been acquired by Abela before 1647 when it was mentioned and illustrated in his Descrittione (44). It is also obvious that not all the objects listed were ancient. The Murcian dishes, the 33 frames and the porcelain plates were all of relatively recent workmanship, and very probably the unworked coral had been fished in modern times (46). The glass and terracotta objects, on the other hand, could very well be ancient (47), even the gilt ones (48). It is not easy to decide what is meant by the 'Egyptian mummy head': probably an Egyptian, or Egyptianizing terracotta protome (49). The elephant tusk could possibly have belonged to the same dwarf species as those found in various Maltese caves in the second half of the 19th century and later (50). Perhaps the "ossa di giganti di sollevata grandezza" mentioned in the Descrittione were also bones of similar Pleistocene animals (51). A molar tooth "da testa gigantea" was said by Abela to have been discovered at Irbiehel, near Birirkhora (52).

Of the antiquities existing then in Abela's collection and overlooked in this list the most noteworthy is probably the anthropoid sarcophagus discovered in Abela's time in a tomb at Ghar Barka, Rabat. The sarcophagus is described in detail and illustrated by an engraving in his book (53). The other noteworthy

44. Ibid., pp.152, 156. See Bonanno, Quintessas, pp.197-199.
45. W. B. Honey, European Ceramic Art from the End of the Middle Ages to about 1815, London 1932, p.438. "'Golden' (lustred) pottery of Murcia is mentioned in a somewhat doubtful text of the Arab traveller Ibn Said (1214-1286) and an inventory of 1469 refers to 'Murcian dishes', but these wares have not been identified, presumably being similar to that of Malaga and Valencia".
46. For the use of such branches for holding fossil shark's teeth pendants see G. Zannini, "Fossil shark's teeth, a Medieval safeguard against poisoning", Melita Historica, VI, no. 4, 1973, pp.391-410, pls 7-3.
47. Terracotta and glass containers are also listed in his collection by Abela, Descrittione, p.40. Some of them are illustrated on pp.60-61.
49. This could be anything from a real Egyptian mummy mask like 3 plaster heads in Berlin Museum (W. S. Smith, The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt, Harvard 1958, p.420) or a Greek or Punic Egyptianizing terracotta protome.
51. Abela, Descrittione, p.143.
omission is the marble base with sculpture in relief discovered at St Paul's Bay and carried by boat to Abela's Casino at Marsa (54). Still more significant is the absence of the two well-known candelabri with bilingual inscriptions which are thought by some to have found their way into Abela's collection in the years between the publication of the Descrittione in 1647 and Abela's death in 1655 (55). Abela himself, in his book, does not specify whether any of the inscriptions documented by him were in his possession (56). Tax evasion or some other ungentlemanly motivation need not necessarily be the reason behind the omission of the coins some of which were gold ones (57).

The last three items in the memoria are given without any specific details. However, some of the small idols are further identified by the name of the divinity they represented in the Descrittione (58) which illustrates also some oil-lamps and small ointment vases found in tombs (59).

The deed of the bequest itself identifies which objects contained in the gabinetto should be kept by the Jesuit Fathers and which other objects Abela reserved the right to dispose of in his lifetime (60). Abela's wish was that the administration and usufruct of the house and garden at Marsa by the Jesuits should include "all the pieces of ancient statues, stones and burials that are now and in the future will be in the same garden, the terracottas and glass vessels and other ancient objects now kept in the gabinetto of the same house, together with all the medaglie of different metals also in the gabinetto." The paintings (quadri), furniture and utensils present in the house then and at the time of his death should not be considered part of the legacy, as if they did not belong to the house, except for those objects which would be attached to the Chapel that Abela had already decided to build in the garden.

Possessio

The Jesuit Fathers took up the perpetual administration and usufruct of Abela's viridarium and its contents by means of a public deed drawn up by the same notary, Michele Ralli (61). By the same deed the 'proprietas et dominium' was assigned to the Langue of Castille and Portugal. The 'possessio' includes specifically, besides the house and garden, the church under the title of the Holy Guardian Angel which had been built on the site in the meantime.

The deed was signed in the house of the viridarium at the Cortin at 2 o'clock in the afternoon of the same day on which Abela died, namely, 4 May 1655. (Cumque) Donator hoc mane vitam cum morte commutaverit, wrote the Notary with copious tears in his eyes (profusis lacrymis scribens): "this morning has the donor life with death exchanged".

35. V. Borg, "Tradizioni e documenti storici", Munione 1963, p.49. Cfr. Bonanno, Quin­
tinas (in the press): between 1647 and 1687.
36. See, for instance, Abela, Descrittione, pp.16-17, 186-187, 207-208. On the other hand,
Canon Giovanni Francesco Agius de Soldanij in his biography of Abela published in Milou, Biblioteca, p.232, declares that Greek and Latin inscriptions were conserved in Abela's Gabinetto in his time.
37. E.g. Abela, Descrittione, pp.204 and 248.
39. Ibid., pp.69-41.
40. N.L.M., Treasury A, Ms, 115, f. xviiiir.
First page of the original 1637 document of Giovanni Francesco Abela's legacy to the Valletta College of the Jesuit Fathers (See pp. 27-35)
Final page of the original 1637 document of Giovanni Francesco Abela's legacy to the Valletta College of the Jesuit Fathers (See pp. 27-35)