

The Maltese Nobility and the Last Gourgion

MARIO SALIBA

The Gourgion Tower, which was situated in Xewkija, was built during the time of the Knights. This was a large village house or a villa in the countryside that was built in such a way that it could withstand an attack by the Turks. So it was more of a fortified villa than a tower. It served the purpose of security and prestige for the owners. This building was unfortunately demolished by the Americans in the Second World War to make way for an airfield in those areas.¹ Although there was the intention to rebuild it as it was after the war, the idea was never carried out and the owners took compensation in the form of cash instead of rebuilding the tower. It is said that the authorities had paid seven thousand pounds sterling to the owners, which in today's money comes to around €641,340.² This was a good sum at the time when you consider that a day's wage of an unskilled worker was a shilling (1/-) or fifty cents of today.³

The Nobles and the Knights

During the initial period after the arrival of the Knights in Malta from Rhodes in 1530, the relationship between the nobles of Malta and the Order of St John was not good. Several thousand people, including several noble families left the islands. The Order tried to take hold of the property and fiefs these families enjoyed. Things got worse when Grand Master Homedes decided to take away certain important responsibilities from Mdina and granted these to the Università at Birgu, which was the city from where initially the Knights ruled. During the first one hundred years or so of the domination of the Knights, the relationship between

the nobles of Malta and the Order was non-existent. The common people were also affected as new taxes were introduced and all military duties were controlled by the Order. It was after the ransacking of the Gozitan population in the siege of 1551 and the Great Siege of 1565 that the relationship between the Knights and the nobles improved. After the building of Valletta, the nobles realised that the Knights were here to stay. During the following fifty years, from the rule of Grand Master Jean de la Cassiere to that of Alof de Wignacourt, the nobles did not have any special relationship with the Order. One Grand Master after another took away fiefs from nobility who failed to pay homage. Later, towards the middle of the eighteenth century many years of amicable co-existence followed. Rich families were ennobled, and the titled persons were given administrative and military positions within the Order but never made Knights. In the militia the local titled personalities were never appointed above the rank of Luogotenente and there was always a Knight directly above them. The nobles were never enlisted in the Order's navy, but they had their own vessels which were used for trading merchandise, slaves and corsairing. Corsairing was authorised and encouraged by nearly all Christian rulers who realised that it was one effective way of keeping their common enemy at bay. For the owners of the galleys,⁴ who were noble families, it was another way in which they increased their wealth. In general during the rule of the Order in Malta, the relationship between the nobility and the Order was never smooth. At the end almost all the Maltese nobility were involved, in one way or another, with the French invasion and

1 When American President Dwight D. Eisenhower was awarded the Hoover Medal Award in 1961 for Engineering, he mentioned this Gozo airfield and the incredible work they managed to do in such a short time. I think this was the only time in history that an American President mentioned Gozo in an official speech. At the time of World War II Eisenhower commanded the Allied Forces landing in North Africa in November 1942.

2 According to the Bureau of Labour Statistics and using measuringworth.com.

3 The author obtained this information from the late Frans Zammit Haber of Xewkija who was familiar with the contractors who conducted the works. He also insisted that some ornamental stones belonging to the tower be preserved and kept in the Gozo Museum of Archaeology. When the author spoke to a member of the Sant Cassia family, he did not know what the amount of the compensation was, but it was not a question of money as they were a rich family. He thinks it was only lack of interest in keeping the tower, as the family owned other properties in Malta.

4 In the form of brigantines or galleots.



The Gourgion Tower.

(Photo: Unknown author - Times of Malta; GMM, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=94897297>).

the subsequent developments.⁵ One of the noble families which had a good relationship with the Order was the de Piro family.

The de Piro family

The de Piro family was a noble family at the time of the Knights. Since before the title was given, the family was already in the mercantile business of goods such as cotton, biscuits, and materials such as lead and gunpowder, and in the slave business, as well as the corsair business. Cosimo de Piro, who was married to Gerolama La Mattina, came from Rhodes when the Knights were expelled from there and dropped anchor here in Malta. Paolo, their second child, was married twice and from the second marriage he had Lorenzo Ubaldesco. This family was mixed with another rich family of merchants by the name of Gourgion through the marriage of Gio Pio de Piro to Anna Antonia

Gourgion. Gio Pio was the son of Ulbaldesco de Piro. Ulbaldesco was married to Cornelia Cauchi and after his wife died, he entered the Order of Knights as a Chaplain and later eventually became Archdeacon of the Cathedral of Mdina. He had studied at the University of Messina from where he had a doctorate (J.U.D.) in both Civil and Canon Law. Fra Ulbaldesco de Piro was appointed Avvocato dei Commissari della Nobiltà meaning he was responsible for checking every application made for someone to join the Order. Later he did not remain in this position. He left all his property to his son Giovanni (Gio) Pio. He too had studied law in Rome. The Grand Master Ramon Perellos (1697-1720) appointed Gio Pio Baron of Budach in 1716,⁶ seven years before his father died. The de Piro family had a good relationship with the Knights, especially with the Grand Masters. So, Perellos not only appointed Baron Gio Pio but also wrote to his Ambassador in Rome to treat Gio Pio

⁵ Some noble families supported the French for ancestral reasons, further reinforced by other connections such as, for example, those of Freemasonry.

⁶ The appointment was made on the 23rd of April 1716, feast of St George. Gio Pio had to contribute two guns a year or their cost, as an annual contribution to the Order.

in a distinct way and when he died, he left him a sum of money. For his part, Baron Gio Pio de Piro left a donation of gold, silver, and money to the Franciscan church in Valletta⁷ where upon his death in 1752 he was buried together with his wife in the family tomb in the same church. Anna Antonia and Gio Pio had a son, Antonio Felicissimo who was married three times. His last marriage was to Elena Grech Balzani in 1736. From this marriage the two had a son, Vincenzo, who became the heir of the family after Vincenzo's father died in 1739. Later, during the French occupation, Marquis Vincenzo de Piro was elected as one of the members of the National Assembly to represent the people. After the 1835 Constitution he was one of the nobles who were selected to serve on the Council to advise and assist in the administration of the Government.

Baron Gio Pio de Piro, the son of Ulbadesco, was erratic in his behaviour. For instance, he did not reciprocate the respect he enjoyed from the Grand Master. Those who were given titles or a feud by the Grand Master would be known officially during a ceremony that was held in Mdina in the presence of the Knights, the nobles and other important people including the highest people of the church. Gio Pio de Piro failed to attend his own investiture as he was in Sicily, and his father Lorenzo Ubaldesco went instead. The latter had occupied the place of Uditore since 1694 when the Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt placed him in this prominent position regarding the administration of justice. It does not appear that Lorenzo Ubaldesco did any important work during his tenure.⁸ To add insult to the wound, three years after taking the title of Baron, Gio Pio failed to pay the contribution of two muskets to be paid on the feast of Santa Barbara. Despite this the same Gio Pio in November of the year 1742 bought from King Philip V of Spain the title of Marquis of Castile for a considerable sum. He registered⁹ the title both in the Cancelleria and in the Castellania in



Giovanni Pio De Piro Gourgion.
(Photo: Dr Louis Joseph Sant Cassia MD, DM, FRCOG).

1743 for the sum of 116 scudi. The nobles obtained titles from abroad because the title of Marquis was considered higher than that of Baron. This title could continue to be inherited if the sum of 116 scudi¹⁰ was paid annually.¹¹ Gio Pio de Piro was also appointed Juror in 1742. Normally these jurors were appointed for one year. He had been sworn in for several years. Apart from the titles he was more interested in the business he had, which involved sugar, wheat, coffee, and rice. He even lent money to the Knights and was active in selling Muslim slaves to a Muslim trader called Rais. His passion for wealth was great and he was undoubtedly successful.

7 At that time, it was customary for the nobles to offer donations and pay for works of art in churches. They would also build private chapels for them on their land usually near their palace or in the countryside.

8 It was the next Uditore, Saverio Gatt, who was a well-known lawyer, and who was Uditore under three Grand Masters (Pinto, Ximenes and de Rohan) who performed a great job on the Code of de Rohan (1784) which are the basis of the laws of Malta during the Knights' time and parts of which continued to be used even during the British times.

9 The absence of such registration did not necessarily invalidate the act of ennoblement.

10 At the time of the Order there were the following coins: 12, 10, 4, 2 and 1 Zecchini, 20, 10, and 5 Scudi in gold pieces; 30, 24, 15, 12, 8, 6, 4, 3, 2, 1 Tari; as well as the Carlino, Cinquina and Half Cinquina pieces in silver; the 4, 2, and 1 Tari pieces and the Carlino, Cinquina, and Half Cinquina, Grano, 3 Piccioli and Piccioli pieces in copper. Each Maltese Scudo was divided in 12 Tari, each of which in turn was worth 20 Grani. It is worth noting that you cannot compare this money to today's money because more important was their purchasing power than their intrinsic value.

11 These foreign titles were dissolved in 1777.

The de Piro family even had a good relationship with the Inquisitor. The Inquisition used to appoint several people from the Maltese aristocracy as patentees. These, apart from the honour that the appointment brought with it, had several privileges including not paying taxes or not having a part in the defence of Malta. It used to happen that because of the relationship and the appointments that these same people had from the Grand Master they would end up in a conflict of interest and their position with the Inquisitor was not compatible with the office they had with the Grand Master. The Grand Master was not happy with this situation and had always feared the power and autonomy the Inquisitor had. Therefore, he tried to entice these nobles to renounce the Inquisitor's patent and keep the office that belonged to them. Thus, indirectly reducing the power of the Inquisitor. One of those who asked to be released from the Inquisitor's patent was Baron Gio Pio de Piro. In 1743 he made an excuse that he had family circumstances in Sicily that did not allow him to serve in his office with the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor did not accept this request because he sent a message to the Pope where he praised Baron de Piro for the respect, he had towards the Church Tribunal. This shows how much the de Piro family was valued both by the Grand Master and by the Institution of the Inquisition.

Who was Giovanni Gourgion?

Giovanni Gourgion was a noble who acquired his wealth through corsairing against the Ottomans. He was the personal secretary (Secreto) of Grand Master Gregorio Carafa and Adrien de Wignacourt. This was a prestigious office that was normally occupied by someone noble. This person was an administrator responsible for the sale and transfer of property of the Order to third parties who made the highest bid, collected due payments and debt to the Order from creditors and he was also responsible for collecting taxes (excise duty). In addition, he had the prerogative to issue permits for the construction of walls, stairs, galleries, and the opening of windows and doors. Without his permission no one could cut stones from quarries, take soil from one place to another, plant or uproot trees or convert caves

into houses. Other responsibilities that the Secreto had were to supervise the water sources and the salt pans. The Secreto or any of his delegates had the responsibility to inspect both new works and renovations that were made on public or fief land. All this shows that this office was an important one and the person who occupied this position apart from being a wealthy person also needed to have certain knowledge and administrative skills and experience.

Apparently, Giovanni Gourgion was a man of both knowledge and administrative experience to the extent that he held the post of Capitano della Verga for five years in the seven-year period he occupied the office of Secreto. He was the last person to hold these two positions at the same time. As Capitano della Verga he had three essential functions: that of Governor or Ruler of the Island of Gozo, of Colonel of the Militia, and of Chief Judge under whom the courts of Uqija fell. The position was given directly by the Grand Master and was for one year, from August 28 to August 18 of the following year. This shows certain abilities that Gourgion had and at the same time the trust he enjoyed from the Grand Master.

The Gourgion family was so influential that it even had its own chapel in Mdina Cathedral when it was restored in 1702. It seems that around the last quarter of the 17th century when he was about 40 years old, Giovanni Gourgion came to live in Gozo in Victoria, in a house near the church of St George.¹² He married Elena née Moscati. Her great-grandfather was Pinu Gauçi who in 1587 restored the chapel that was in Għammar and which today we find as the Basilica of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu.¹³ Apart from being rich, Giovanni Gourgion was also a religious man and loved the church. He commissioned Mattia Preti who used to work in the Conventual Church of the Knights of St John in Valletta, to make a painting dedicated to Our Lady of Charity, known as The Virgin of Mercy with Holy Souls in Purgatory, for the church of St George in Victoria. The Calabrian fulfilled Gourgion's wish in 1688. In this painting one can see the figures of Giovanni and Elena.¹⁴ With this gesture Giovanni

12 According to Mdina Cathedral documents, in 1695 Giovanni Gourgion was 50 years old.

13 Originally the chapel was built by a noble family and it was known as Ta' Gentili. It was completely abandoned so much so that the Apostolic Visitor Mgr. Pietro Dusina ordered to be closed. After its restoration by Pinu Gauçi it started to be known as Ta' Pinu.

14 This was a common theme in commissioned works of art.

Gourgion became one of the first of the aristocracy in Gozo to contribute to religious art.¹⁵ It was shortly after this time that Gourgion started planning to build a fortified house in Xewkija. This part of Gozo had started to grow and Xewkija had been made a parish in 1678. On that side of the coast known as Mgarr ix-Xini, a watchtower was built to guard the south-east of Gozo. Gourgion thought that this was the place where he had a lot of land, and it was the ideal and safe place to build his house or fortified villa. This tower was completed in 1690. It was ceremoniously inaugurated by the Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt. The tower, along with the vast lands of Xewkija, became part of the de Piro estate when Gourgion's daughter married the Baron of Budach. Through the construction of this tower together with his support in the churches for religious art, Gourgion strengthened and consolidated the position of the Gourgion family among the Maltese aristocracy and his connections in Gozo. Other nobles and people who had a prominent position with the Order also commissioned works of art for the churches.

The Gourgion tower was an unusual building. The main idea was a house or villa of a noble family in the countryside, but at the same time a house that was safe in case of attack by the Turks. Even though at that time the Baroque style was at its best, this tower did not reflect this era. Lacking any extra ornamentation or ornamental sculpture, the tower was built in a simple, solid, and unobtrusive style. The sense of fortification left this tower of any ornament and design that gave it a certain beauty or elegance. The only ornaments were the two bridges in the front corners and the small dome that gave the tower an Oriental hint. It also had two small galleries and two high-round windows in the front.

Giovanni and Elena had three children, two boys and a girl. The eldest of the boys was called Adriano who became a priest and even became Vicar of Bishop Alpheran de Bussan. The younger, Agostino Giovanni accepted his father's work at sea and continued where his father left off in corsairing through two galleots, one of them, jointly owned with Gio Pio de Piro. While the daughter, Anna

Antonia, married the same Gio Pio de Piro so that the power and wealth of these two families continued to grow. Through this marriage Gio Pio de Piro became known as Gio Pio de Piro Gourgion. In addition, Don Adriano left what he inherited from his mother, Elena, to Gio Pio de Piro Gourgion. This inheritance consisted of several buildings in Lija, a few houses in Mdina, four fields which included a large territory of land in Xewkija where the Gourgion Tower was built. The de Piro family is said to have had an income of 10,000 scudi a year which was a hefty sum because it was calculated that a noble family with an income of 4,000 scudi a year was considered wealthy.¹⁶

The family continued through the second Baron of Budach Vincenzo de Piro who was the son of Antonio Felicissimo de Piro. He was a Juror and Procurator of the Inquisition. He was also Colonel Commander in the Royal Regiment of Sicily. Vincenzo was married to Maria Testaferrata Abela who was from a noble family, and they had two sons, the elder Antonio who became the third Baron of Budach and Giuseppe who took the title of Marquis. The title of Baron of Budach passed to Sir Giuseppe Maria de Piro (1794-1870) who was a scholar and wrote a book about the last plague of Malta (1813-1814) which strangely enough he dedicated to the Governor Sir Frederick Ponsonby. After that there was no male heir and the title passed to a girl Francesca de Piro who tried to leave the title and her property to the Bishop of Gozo. This wish was disputed in the Courts by Giuseppe (Pinu) de Piro who was the eldest son of Francesca's first cousin, Carmelo. Giuseppe won the case and became the sixth Baron of Budach. He had built a large villa known as Villa Gourgion¹⁷ with a large garden in Lija. He remained a bachelor and therefore the title was passed on to one of his grandchildren who were the children of his younger brother Alessandro. This grandson was Igino de Piro (1874-1942) who became the seventh Baron of Budach. Baron Igino had given the land where the Basilica of Ta' Pinu was built. Besides Igino there were six other brothers including Monsignor Giuseppe de Piro who founded the Missionary Society of St Paul. Giovanni (Gio) Pio de Piro another of the brothers

15 Some years later Gourgion commissioned other work from the canvas of Mattia Preti this time to St Augustine's church in Valletta where we see St Augustine together with St John the Baptist and Blessed St William of Aquitaine.

16 With 4,000 scudi at that time you could buy a palace.

17 In this villa the National Assembly met on 27 May 1921. During that historic meeting the National Assembly accepted the Amery Constitution.

had inherited the Gourgion estate from his uncle Pinu.¹⁸ The only son of Igino, Jerome inherited the title of Baron and became the eighth Baron of Budach. He married Phyllis Cassar Torreggiani and they had five children, including the eldest Nicholas, who is the ninth Baron of Budach and Marquis of Castile. Today, he owns Casa Rocca Piccola in Valletta which was the original residence of the Sant Cassia and later the Cassar Torreggiani family.

Mixing between noble families through marriages was something common. Through the marriages the families had more than one surname. When Giovanni Pio De Piro inherited his uncle Pinu he became known as Gio Pio Depiro Gourgion¹⁹ (1881-1951) and therefore became the owner of the entire Gourgion estate including the Gourgion Tower in Xewkija. Gio Pio Depiro Gourgion married Emma Gauci Tramblett and they had six children: Piera, Yole, Berta, Anna, Alessandro,²⁰ the last Gourgion, and Myriam. Anna Depiro Gourgion was married in the Sant Cassia family to Henri Sant Cassia and they had two children Louis Joseph²¹ and Maria Arrigo.

In conclusion the influence, apart from financial influence due to ownership of land and wealth, and the presence of the nobility in the administration of Malta continued to dwindle during the British rule and by the last two decades of the nineteenth century it lost any political power it might have had. The presence of noble persons in the Senate still allowed by the 1921 Amery Constitution was the last occasion of its presence as a group in a political institution. On individual basis, some nobles were elected to the Lower House or Legislative Assembly and one prominent nobleman, Count Sir Gerald (later Lord) Strickland, was Prime Minister of Malta from 1927 to 1932. Later on, Act No. XXIX of 1975 although it did not abolish the titles of nobles 'for historical reasons', they were no longer recognised by the State.

References:

Apap Bologna, P. (Editor), 2011. *"Nonna Chica" Orsola De Piro D'Amico and her Descendants*. Malta: The Salesian Press.

Calleja, J. and Zammit Haber, F. (1997). *The Gourgion Tower*. Malta: Midsea Publications.

Montalto, J. (1979). *The Nobles of Malta 1530-1800*. Malta: Midsea Books Ltd.

Refalo, M. (2019). *Fragments Essays on nineteenth and early twentieth century Malta*. Malta: Kite.

Sammut, J.C. (1992). *From Scudo to Sterling*. Malta: Said International Ltd.

The de Piro Family Website: The Family (casaroccapiccola.com).

Remarks Upon Receiving the Hoover Medal Award | The American Presidency Project (ucsb.edu)

The author thanks Dr Louis Joseph Sant Cassia MD, DM, FRCOG for the information about his family and for the photo of his grandfather Giovanni Pio Gourgion De Piro.

Dr Saliba studied at the Gozo Lyceum and the University of Malta graduating MD in 1982. In 1990 he obtained a post graduate Diploma in Medical Sciences (Diving Medicine) from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. In 2009 he finished a master's degree in Family Medicine at the University of Malta. He is a Fellow of the European College of Baromedicine and retired from hospital work in 2021 as a Consultant in Baromedicine. He still practices as a General Practitioner.

18 As a result, he took the surname Depiro Gourgion.

19 While the Marquis de Piro family used a lower case de Piro, some other branches used Depiro and that included Gioi Pio Depiro Gourgion.

20 Dr Alessandro Depiro Gourgion BA, LL.D. was the last person to enjoy the Fedecomesso of the Gourgion estate. The Gourgion Fedecomesso was the entailed estate instituted by Elena Gourgion in 1728.

21 Dr Louis Joseph Sant Cassia MD DM FRCOG a retired Consultant Gynaecologist and Obstetrician.