

Gozo: The Identity of an Island Region

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Introduction

It has been said that all island societies have developed particular features to make them 'unique' (Patton, 1996: 190). The island region of Gozo is no exception. It is an example of an island identity, which is the result of its unique geography, history and culture based on special characteristics of an island separated by sea from the mainland. Gozo has unique landscape and seascape. It has a particular environment, culture and traditions and possible ways of communication. Insularity does not however necessarily mean isolation. Although insularity is not the same as isolation, one could say that the insularity of an island very often generates a certain amount of isolation from the mainland. Despite the fact of this insularity, Gozo was able to sustain a dynamic interaction with mainland Malta.

Insularity has obviously influenced very much and determined the outlook and life-style of the Gozitans as compared to the Maltese. Although in recent years connectivity between the two islands has

improved a lot, the difference in outlook approach and temperament is still very evident.

One could say that the Gozitans are more inward looking than the Maltese but this is mainly due to historical reasons that will be mentioned later on, and due to this general attitude, Gozitans generally tend to fend for themselves and have to try harder than their Maltese counterparts. An overarching Catholic religion has had the same influence in Gozo as in Malta as regards the upbringing and formation of the average Gozitan character, but has been more pronounced in Gozo than in Malta.

Geographical Significance

Gozo's geographical location plays a pivotal role in shaping its identity. Situated just five kilometres north of Malta, the island has been a crossroads for civilisations throughout history. Its strategic position was more pronounced in the past than it is today. For example archaeological evidence suggests that Gozo was very important from the



point of view of navigation in the Mediterranean Sea. The area around Ras il-Wardija was inhabited in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and the sanctuary, first constructed during the Punic period in the 3rd century BC, must have served as a beacon for mariners sailing between the Maltese Islands and North Africa, as well as a temple sanctuary to provide protection for ships harbouring in Xlendi (Gambin, 2002/3: 20). Evidence of the trade that passed through Gozo in the Punic period are the remains of a Phoenician vessel still laden with cargo, deep beneath the sea, to the west of Gozo. The vessel belongs to the Archaic period and has been lying largely intact at a depth of more than 100 metres after sinking approximately 2,700 years ago (Oldfather, 1952: 129).

Diodorus Siculus writing in the first century A.D. had this to say about Gozo's navigational importance. "After this island [Malta] there is a second, which bears the name of Gaulos, lying out in the open sea and adorned with well-situated harbours, a Phoenician colony. The number of wrecks identified in the area confirm that Xlendi was in use throughout a long spell in antiquity. Although not all scientifically investigated, various projects carried out on the site confirm the presence of more than one shipwreck from different periods (Gambin, 2002/3).

Over Development in Gozo

Gozo's natural beauty has in the past captivated the hearts of both locals and visitors, further bolstering its identity as a tranquil and picturesque haven. However that may no longer be the case today. It is very evident that Gozo has suffered the impact of modern external influences especially after Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004. The idea of a single market where all barriers are removed as regards trade, travel, and transfer of capital and human resources has had its impact on an otherwise rural, quiet and tranquil community. In addition, Gozo has become the victim of excessive tourism.

What was once a separate world with its own traditions, ecosystems, culture and landscape has now become more like another piece of Malta's urban environment. The same social problems that

are evident in Malta have become a characteristic of Gozo, namely population pressures, influx of foreign immigrants/settlers with their contrasting cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds which sometimes (if not most of the time) translate into social complications.

Up to a few years ago there was no question as to who the people, that formed the Gozitan society were. Except for a few settlers, (amounting to a few hundred), mostly British, the Gozitan population consisted mainly of local born and bred Gozitans, most of whom lived off the fruit of the land and operated the local sphere of industries. They generally maintained their traditional socio-cultural characteristics which were passed from generation to generation. This might no longer be the case. Due to the economic model embraced by the present administration, the immigration doors have been opened to let a flood of foreigners.

Another factor that is endangering the identity of Gozo is overdevelopment especially since the modification in planning policies and attitudes adopted by the Planning Authority in the last decade or two. Gozo has unique characteristics as far as landscape is concerned. With its stretches of green areas: valleys, hills, cliffs and promontories all in a very short circumscribed space, the island is very different from Malta. Although lip service has been paid towards a different planning regime for Gozo, nothing has been done towards this objective. Instead we are seeing an intensive attempt, by construction magnates, to overdevelop this small island to the extent that many green stretches are disappearing.

Population Shifts

Of major significance is the population shift in Gozo. From the year 1995 till the year 2021 the Gozitan population has increased by more than 10,000.¹ Almost one fifth of the population are not Maltese citizens. Although the Roman Catholic religion remains the dominant religion, it is by no means the only religion of the island. Eighty-four percent declare themselves to be Roman Catholic. The rest come within a spectrum of Orthodox, other Christians, Islam, other religions or no religion.²

1 29,026 in 1995, 39,287 in 2021. 2021 census

2 City Population: Gozo and Comino: https://www.citypopulation.de/en/malta/admin/026__gozo_comino/ [accessed March 2024].

Historical and Cultural Legacy

Over the centuries, Gozo has experienced major historical episodes, with each era contributing to its rich tapestry of traditions. From ancient temples, such as Ġgantija, considered the world's oldest freestanding structure, to the medieval citadel and churches, the island is a living museum of human history. During the Roman period Gozo enjoyed its own municipal status and its own administrative autonomy. In fact, it minted coins and had its own government. This autonomy probably extended to commercial selfsufficiency and this explains why shipping and sea navigation called on Gozo directly. During the medieval period, although Gozo passed through the same fortunes and foreign domination as Malta, some historical events may be pointed out.

For instance, in 1425 the Gozitan population revolted against the feudal overlord Don Gonsalvo Monroy. The island had been neglected, unprotected and ravaged by continuous pirate raids. The feudal overlord made no attempt to find a solution to the extreme scarcity of food and other essential commodities. It was the Gozitan population which first took up arms against their overlord. The subsequent year, the revolt spread over to Malta. Monroy could not quell the rebellion which ended with grant of the *Magna Carta Libertatis* to the Maltese and Gozitans on the 20th June 1428. This Charter of Liberties contains a very unique and significant article, namely that the Maltese and the Gozitans were given the right to revolt if ever they lose their status as part of the Royal Domain and their freedom.

The Siege of Gozo of 1551 is a big scar, not only on the history of the island, but also on Maltese history in general, even though this episode is usually left out or purposely understated in most history books published by Maltese historians. It was the time when all or most of the Gozitan population was taken into slavery by the Ottoman invaders. To the Order of St John, Gozo and its population were expendable. Even before the incident happened it was evident that the defences of the island were inadequate and neglected.

This historical episode, more than any other, must have imparted something to the character of the Gozitans who are known to carry not only an

insular mentality and introverted outlook, but also to distrust anybody who is not “one of their own” and more inclined to rely on their own resources. Obviously history has taught them so.

Another important chapter in the history of Gozo (something that is never narrated in general Maltese history books) is that for twenty two months Gozo was an independent nation from Malta. As soon as news of the Maltese insurrection against the French reached Gozo on the 2nd September 1798, the Gozitans took up arms against the French and with the help of the British were able to oust the French from the Island in October 28 1798, less than two months from the inception of the uprising. The French remained in Malta, albeit blockaded in Valletta, till 1800, and Gozo was run as an autonomous region by Archpriest Saver Cassar as Superintendent of Gozo. Cassar sent his representative lawyer, Francesco Pace, as a resident ambassador to the Sicilian court. And there are official documents that refer to Gozo as “la nazione del Gozzo”.

The Road Towards Autonomy

As has been stated, throughout its history Gozo always sought, and for some particular periods had, some form of autonomy. Starting from recorded history, in some particular periods, Gozo enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy from Malta. For example, during the Roman period, Gozo had its own *Municipium* autonomous from Malta with a republican government and minted its own coins. Little is known during the time when Gozo, together with Malta passed under the domination of the Byzantines (the Eastern Roman Empire) as well as during the Arab domination. A study by Joseph Busuttil, Stanley Fiorini and Horatio Vella (Busuttil, et al, 2010) points towards a hypothesis that during the Arab domination, Gozo remained mainly Christian while the Islamic religion was enforced in Malta.

After 1127, Malta and Gozo shared their destiny with Sicily, passing successively under the dominion of the Swabians, 1194, the Angevins, 1266, and the Aragonese, 1282. However around 1397, Gozo had its own Universitas (*Universitas Gaudisii*) which was a representative body defending the local interests and maintaining its own privileges and

freedoms. The situation remained more or less the same under the Knights of Malta when apart from the *Universitas Gaudisii*, Gozo also had its own Governor as representative of the Grand Master. During the short period of the French rule, Gozo, like Malta, was divided into cantons, but after the rebellion of 1798 Gozo enjoyed a brief period of independence.

The British installed a Commissioner for Gozo replacing Saver Cassar as Superintendent of Gozo after the French had capitulated, but in 1814 Sir Thomas Maitland, Governor of Malta, abolished the *Universitas Gaudisii* and downgraded the Gozo law Courts.³ From a court presided by a Judge the Gozo Courts were presided by a magistrate. The difference signified that the Gozitan Courts were downgraded to inferior courts as far as competence and jurisdiction were concerned.

However on the 14th April 1961 a Civic Council was established which gave Gozo a local government with limited powers, mostly in the area of public health and public works, including those of imposing rates and administering government revenue raised on the island. It consisted of an elected assembly of representatives consisting of a delegate from every village (14 in all) meeting at regular intervals. It was presided over by a President and having a Secretary/Treasurer who took care of the day to day administration, besides taking the minutes of every meeting and preparing the annual financial budget and administrative reports. This experiment in local government was short lived because it was abolished by a government in 1973, after a referendum. The Gozo Civic Council is today deemed by experts in public administration to have been the best experiment in devolution of power, autonomy and local government.

With Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004, a Declaration was annexed to the Treaty of Accession (Declaration 36) which seeks to address the social and economic disparities between Malta and Gozo. The Declaration states: "The Commission would be asked to propose appropriate measures, as required, in the framework of the Community regional policy

or other relevant Community policies, to ensure the continuation of the reduction of disparities between Gozo and Malta as well as the further integration of Gozo into the internal market on fair conditions. In particular, in the event that Malta, as a whole, would no longer be eligible to certain measures of the regional policy, the report would assess whether the specific economic situation of Gozo justifies a continued eligibility of Gozo to those measures, and under which conditions, during the reference period."

Although this is only a unilateral Declaration made by the Maltese Government, and apparently it only binds the Maltese Government and not the European Commission, there are those who maintain that such a Declaration imparts some sort of regionality to the island of Gozo.

Act No. XVI of 2009 amending the Local Councils Act (Chapter 363 of the Laws of Malta) added another Schedule to the existing Schedules to the Act, containing a list of five regions of Malta and Gozo with the local councils that they comprise. It is stated that the Gozo Region comprises the Local Councils that have been set up in Gozo by that Act, and in that manner one could refer to The Gozo Region as representing the Gozitan electorate. However neither the present Gozo Region nor the other Regions of Malta are entrusted with the normal legislative and administrative powers normally associated with a Regional Council. They can be considered as Regions only in name and regalia. For example the President of the Gozo Region is elected from the members of the Local Councils. The actual administrative powers reside with the local councils of every town and village not with the Region. And if one were to look at the powers of the Regional Committee, these mostly consist of keeping the street lights in a good state, or organising cultural event and similar ephemeral competences.

Most Gozitans are aware that it would be in the best interest of the island of Gozo if it had, as in the past, its own representative assembly with powers to legislate and administer Gozitan affairs in all sectors of public life, except of course in foreign policy and matters that need to be integrated in the

³ Then as now, Gozo has its own law courts independent from Malta.



The Circolo Gozitano logo.

national interest. Then and only then could one really speak of Gozo as a Region.

Circolo Gozitano: Preserving Gozitan Identity

A cornerstone in the preservation of Gozo's identity is the Circolo Gozitano, founded in 1913. This esteemed social and cultural organisation has been instrumental in promoting Gozitan values and traditions. The Circolo organises various events, such as art exhibitions, literary gatherings, and folklore performances, fostering a sense of community and solidarity among Gozitans. It has in recent years instituted the conferment of the Ġieħ Ġhawdex Award on distinctive personalities who have helped and promoted Gozo and the Gozitan identity.

Beginning in 2005, the bicentenary of Saver Cassar's demise, the Circolo Gozitano commemorates Jum Ġhawdex together with the Gozo Region and the Gozo Ministry. Jum Ġhawdex is celebrated on the 28th October which is the date of the capitulation of the French in 1798 starting a period in which Gozo was independent.

The next step in affirming the identity of Gozo as an island region is the adoption of the Gozo flag. The Circolo Gozitano has been promoting the establishment of a regional flag for Gozo in line with accepted practices worldwide where regions do not only have their own coat of arms (which in the case of Gozo already exists) but also their regional colours. The colours of the Gozo flag are inspired by



The Gozo flag.

the motto of Gozo: *Fertilis et ad undis caput effero* (A promising land with flowing water); therefore the blue and the green with a white buffer in the middle. So far the idea has not caught on.

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