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“O MELITA INFELIX”

A poem on the Great Siege written in 1565

CARMEL CASSAR

Ad Patriam (O Melita Infelix) was discovered by coincidence in a volume of the Magna Curia Castellania — the Grand Master's courts. In the second volume of a section entitled “*Cedulae, Supplicae et Taxationes*” for the years 1565-66, I came across this poem signed by “*Lucas de Armenia — Patricius Melivetus*”. *Ad Patriam* is to be found on the recto of the last folio. (1)

The poem consists of twelve lines and is written in simple latin verse based on the distribution of long and short syllables. It has rhythm which could be heard when read aloud. Other indications of its rhythm are the scribbings found all over the sheet of paper but notably the signs above the first verse and beside every couple of verses. Underneath the poem one finds a dedication which reads: “*Al molto mag. signor mio da fratello honorando*”. The signature is however illegible and it is difficult to deduce to whom it was really dedicated. One could also note various other attempts at composition. (2)

The handwriting of Luca de Armenia is legible and is typical of that of the second half of the sixteenth century, when it, in fact, was written.

The formal title of the poem is “*Ad Patriam*”, but de Armenia himself seems to prefer to call it “*O Melita Infelix*” which constitutes the introductory phrase of the poem. Furthermore this same phrase is found twice again at the end of the poem. The signature shows that de Armenia considered himself to be not only a Patrician but also a Maltese citizen. (3)

Luca de Armenia was in fact a Maltese citizen resident of Mdina, (4) and son of Antonio de Armenia. (5) G.F. Abela gives a brief account of the de

1. [P]alace [A]rchives [V]alletta, M.C.C. Ced., Supp. et Taxationes Vol. II 1565-66, unpginated.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. From the research that was carried out, one could deduce that the De Armenia family resided at Mdina since, at least, the times of Luca's grandfather Pietro. cf. G.F. Abela, “*Della Descrittione di Malta*”, Malta, 1647, p. 455 and *L'Arte* Vol. IV No. 85 pp. 2-4, Malta 1866. Luca de Armenia's name is to be found in the list of family households at Mdina in an undated document, [C]athedra [A]rchives, [M]dina, A.C.M. Misc., 441, Vol. A, f. 118. We know that his household at this unknown date consisted of eight persons.
5. Abela *op. cit.*, p. 456 and [N]ational [L]ibrary of [M]alta Libr., 1142, Sec II Not. 63, where he is mentioned to have served as Vice Portulano, Judge, Jurat and secretary to the Viceroy of Sicily.

Armenia family. (6)

The de Armenia were originally a family of corsairs fighting against Muslim shipping and had occasionally served the King of the Two Sicilies, of which Malta then formed part. The most important of the ancestors of Luca was Pietro de Armenia who served as Captain of the Galley owned by Giovanni di Nava, and was captain of his own Galeotti. Pietro de Armenia was honoured by the Grand Master of the Order of St. John Fra Battista d'Ursino on 11 October 1470 for a safe conduct. Pietro was offered the post of keeper of the City by King Ferdinand in 1508 (7) for his merits and service, and the "giardino" of Baccari known as il Gorghenti with its territory, as well as the "Stagno di S. Giorgio", but before Pietro de Armenia could take possession of the lands he was killed in a naval battle with the Moors. His privileges were transferred to his first son Antonio. (8)

Antonio de Armenia became Vice Portulano of the Maltese Islands in March 1527 when he was recommended by the Emperor Charles V to the Viceroy of Sicily. (9) Besides, he served as judge, jurat and secretary to the Viceroy. It is said that Antonio was very tall in stature and possessed great strength. (10) Antonio had two sons, Fra Leone who was a dominican friar, and Luca, (11) author of the poem.

Fra Leone, brother of Luca de Armenia, was a good preacher who spent his life travelling in Europe. He was greatly respected by Pope Paul III and lived for a long time in Rome, Venice, Naples, Parma and Florence. It was only after forty-seven years that he returned to Malta. (12)

Luca de Armenia, his brother, led a very active life as well. (12a) He must have been born in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, as he is mentioned as the father of Giovanni Giacomo baptized on 28 April 1541. (13) He was

6. G.F. Abela, *op. cit.*, p. 454, quotes the surname as Armenia. However it is de Armenia in the signature of Luca himself, in the poem; d'armenia in A. Bosio *Dell'Istoria della Sacra Religione et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gierosolimitano*, Tomo III, Roma 1602, pp. 515-516: darmenia in the Mdina Households List, C.A.M., A.C.M. Misc. 441, Vol. A, f. 118 and Vols. B and C. Since Luca signs his surname in its latin form "de Armenia", it has been retained here in the same form.
7. G.F. Abela *op. cit.*, p. 455; N.L.M. Libr. 1142, Section II Not. 19, and *L'Arte*, Vol. IV. 1866 No. 85 pp. 2-4.
8. G.F. Abela *op. cit.*, p. 455.
9. *Ibid.*
10. N.L.M. Libr. 1142 Section II, Not. 63 and C.A.M., A.C.M. Misc. 441, Vol. A, f. 3v.
11. Abela *op. cit.*, f. 456.
12. N.L.M. Libr. 1142. Section I Not. 664.
- 12a According to Valentini, *Archivum Melitense*, IX, 175, Luca d'Armena together with Antonio Callus, was granted a licence to seek ancient treasure in 1530.
13. A.P. Ecc. Cathedralis S. Pauli Vol. I. 1539-1609 p.43.

followed by a sister, Margarita, who was baptized on 26 August 1543. (14)

According to Abela, Luca had only one son, Mario, whose birth is not recorded in the Mdina Parish records, which commence in 1539. (15) It could be that Mario was baptized before that date and must have been the older son of Luca. (16) The younger brother whose only mention is in the Parish records must have died at an early age. Death at infancy was very common during that period. One cannot exclude that Giovanni Giacomo and Mario were the same person.

We know that Luca was sent to Sicily as jurat by the Università in 1541. (17) Luca de Armenia had also some direct connections with the Great Siege. When on 18 May 1565, the Turkish Armada appeared off the Maltese coast, the population was terrified and began to flee from the villages. Bosio relates in great detail the events of that day, and the discussions which were held between the Università of Mdina and the Portuguese governor of the town, Fra Pietro Mesquita. (18) The Università wanted to send an ambassador to La Valette at the Borgo, and the gentleman chosen for the mission was Luca de Armenia. De Armenia was to ask the Grand Master whether the town of Mdina should be evacuated and its citizens go to the Birgo, or else to have troops and ammunition supplied to them in case of need. (19)

De Armenia arrived at dusk when the Grand Master was reviewing his troops. Although this kept La Valette occupied till late at night, he still found time to receive de Armenia for what Bosio calls "a private audience". De Armenia was assured that in case of need all necessities would be sent to Mdina. Luca de Armenia went home with this reply. Next morning, 19 May, the Grand Master sent the company of Captain Fra Giovanni Vagnone, together with the company of Casal S. Caterina (Żejtun), Birkirkara, Birmiftuh (Gudja), and Żurrieq with a great quantity of ammunition.

Luca must have been an able soldier for he is mentioned as head of a great number of soldiers during the Siege. He fought with ardour to such an

14. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

15. *Ibid.*,

16. Mario de Armenia was Vice portulano of Mdina in 1584. Petition to the Grand Master P.A.V., M.C.C. Ced., Supp. et Tax. Vol. VI 1582-1600 f. 21v-22.

17. Abela *op. cit.*, 456. There is evidence that Luca served as jurat of Mdina from May 1560 to April 1561 and from April to July 1564. C.A.M., A.C.M. Misc. 441, Vol. B. f. 4; f. 11; f. 15; f. 16; f. 19; f. 21; f. 23; f. 25; f. 26; f. 29; f. 30; f. 32; f. 33; f. 34; f. 35; f. 36; he signed the bills of the fortifications of Mdina in those years as jurat. He left Malta several times after 1541, as shown in the bills of the various padroni of vessels — 29 Sept. — 1 Oct. 1561 *Ibid.*; ff. 6-7v; 12 June 1563 — f. 13v., 29 Oct. 1563 *Ibid.*, f. 23.

18. Bosio *op. cit.*, p. 515.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Bosio *op. cit.*, p. 516.

extent that he asked La Valette for an additional force of soldiers and munitions. We know that Luca and his men fought all through the siege and were able to kill more than a thousand Turks in 20 days. (21) One could thus say that Luca de Armenia was one of the heroes of the Siege of 1565.

Another mention of Luca is in a petition by Don Pietro Cibena in 1566. Don Cibena owed a pair of "manichi di maglia", worth more than 10 scudi, to Luca. Cibena went to court for his debt, but somehow, something impeded the court to continue the case. For this reason Cibena pleaded with the Grand Master to proceed with the case (22) Unfortunately one does not come across any reference to this case in the proceedings of the Magna Curia Castellania. (23)

Mention of Luca de Armenia is also found in the criminal proceedings of the Inquisition. A very small note on the front page of case 73 says that de Armenia was denounced for not taking off his cap while praying and for not kneeling down at the time of the elevation of the Host at mass. (24) This was in 1576 when Luca must have already become old. In fact he died and was buried on 11 October 1579 at the Cathedral Church, Mdina. (25)

Ad Patriam — O Melita Infelix is an invaluable contribution to the literature the 1565 Siege, since, as yet, we know of no other contemporary poem written by a Maltese. From the above account on the de Armenia family, one could easily deduce that it was one of the leading Maltese families. This adds to the significance of the poem which is vague at first glance; one could find it puzzling to conclude whether it was in fact written before or after the siege. The fact that La Valette is looked upon as shield against the Turkish invasion gives the impression that the poem was written after. However, one should bear in mind that there had been other skirmishes with the Turks before 1565. Furthermore it is doubtful whether one would write such a poem expressing fear and doubt about the future when Malta and the rest of Europe were celebrating victory.

"...Now fury or anger or a heavenly sentence is against you...", and

"...Alas we flee our native land, we leave the city by herself..."

indicate that the poet was not just afraid of a renewed enemy attack. The stress of the times must have compelled him to write a poem in which he pessimistically senses very great danger. Fear of defeat swept the island in the months immediately preceding the expected siege. (26)

21. N.L.M. Libr. 1142, Section II, Not. 595.

22. P.A.V. M.C.C. "Ced. Supp. et Tax." Vol. II 1565-66 f. 166v., case dated 21 March 1566. dated 21 March 1566.

23. P.A.V., M.C.C., A.O.

24. C.A.M., A.I.M. Proc. Crim. Vol. 3B, f.726 dated 15 March 1576.

25. A.P. Ecc. Cathedralis S. Pauli — Mdina, p. 818.

26. N.L.M., Univ. 13 f. 438-439v. — 20 February 1565 and *Ibid.*, 440r-v., dated 12 April and f. 441r-v., — 25 February 1565, relate how the Università resolved to ask the

It is also possible that the poem was written during the very first days of the Siege. As Bosio relates, Luca de Armenia was chosen by the Università as ambassador to the Grand Master. The reasons, as we have already seen, were twofold: either the evacuation of Mdina to the Borgo, or the reinforcement of the town by sending more companies of soldiers and ammunition. (27) It seems that the poet was concerned about the Grand Master's reply although most were in favour of evacuating the old Town. Perhaps that is why the last line of the poem says:

"...Sorrowful (city), farewell, farewell for a second and a third time,
we are left to our tears and grief, no other city will be like (you), farewell."

For the Maltese population it must have been both ominous and terrifying to realise that the much feared Turkish Armada was on the horizon. *O Melita Infelix* is Luca de Armenia's opening phrase and it splendidly carries much more of the poignancy felt at that crucial moment than the vague formal title *Ad Patriam*.

I am grateful to all those who helped and encouraged me to publish this article. Thanks are due to Fr. John Azzopardi Curator of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina, for the transliteration of the poem into English, and advice; Mr. Lawrence Schiavone for his comment on the style of the poem and other suggestions; Mr. Dominic Cutajar, Curator of St. John's Co-Cathedral Museum, Valletta, for his help and advice throughout, and Mr. Mario Buhagiar, Architect Mr. M. Ellul of the Antiquities Section and of the Palace Archives and Mr. J. Caruana, for their encouragement and help.

APPENDIX I

Transcription of the Poem

AD PATRIAM

O melita infelix quingentis mille peractis
semper erat Christi lux tua sancta fides

Et fidei semper constans grata atque fidelis
et regibus cunctis principibusque tuis

Ut cesar magnus, Jove dante, valetta magister

Viceroy to send a large quantity of grain from Sicily as the jurats feared a long siege. Moreover, the Parish records of Malta were not kept up to date for some time before and after siege, with the exception of Mdina. This must have been the effect of the fear and confusion that reigned both before and after the Turkish attack.

27. Bosio *op. cit.*, p. 515.

te salvam a magna classe orientis habet.

Nunc furor ut ira est in te aut sententia celi
 classe potens reditum sanguine et igne parat.

Heu patrianque fugimus solanque relinquimus urbem
 dispersi veluti sors sua cuique datur

Mesta vale bis terque vale lacrimisque relictis (s)
 et gemitu similis non erit illa vale.

Lucas de Armenia Patricius Melivetanus

A Literal Translation

O unhappy Malta, in the past fifteen centuries
 Christ's holy faith was always your light.

Always constant in faith, grateful and loyal
 to all the kings and to your rulers.

Grand Master La Valette, like the great Ceasar, heaven permitting,
 has kept you safe from the great fleet of the Orient.

Now fury on anger or a heavenly sentence is against you,
 He who commands a powerful fleet is preparing a return in blood and fire.

Alas we flee our native land, we leave the city by herself
 dispersing each one according to one's fate.

Sorrowful (city), farewell, farewell for a second and a third time,
 we are left to our tears and grief, no other city will be like (you), farewell.

APPENDIX II

GENEALOGY OF THE DE ARMENIA FAMILY

based on G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta*. pp. 454-456.

