

**Gio Anton Vassallo's  
*Storia di Malta;*  
Questing after a National Soul**

*Simon Mercieca*

**COMMEMORATION  
BY  
THE MALTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

*2003*



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*To  
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as a token of thanks  
for her work at the  
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# **Gio Anton Vassallo's *Storia di Malta*; Questing after a National Soul**

*Commemorative Lecture delivered by Simon Mercieca before the Malta Historical Society at the National Library of Malta, Valletta, on Monday, October 27, 2003.*

The writing of Maltese History has its modern origins in the nineteenth century. Until then a complete history of Malta had only been attempted once by a foreign historian D. Miège which was published between 1840-41. All previous works were a compilation of strewn fragments of historical writings collaged to make up an accrued layer which began to constitute the foundations for the writing of our local history. A tour of the local history market would find all these works illustrated with geographical, religious, descriptive portrays and images of Malta. In the wake of the romantic spirit the local scene was in search for a national soul. Within this context, history needed a new preamble. The new emerging history had to be unimpeachable but at the same time embedded with romantic ideas; it could not afford not to be imbued with patriotic spirit. At the same time the written work had to be based on historical facts that meant, leaving nothing which could be criticized except the interpretation of the historical ideas. The Italian historiographic tradition and its philosophy would leave an impact on the writing of local history. The Maltese literary tradition was more than receptive to the Italian school of thought which generated an intense debate both in terms of value and validity. At the same time nineteenth-century Malta could not remain distant and detached from the new colonial experience. Any individual who wanted to approach the history of Malta had to link the vibrant and romantic spirit with the empiricist school of the emerging British History writing.

## **Some opinions on Vassallo's Work**

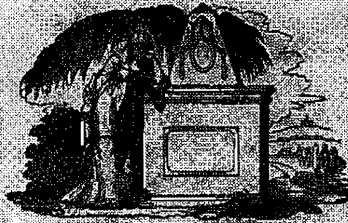
Gio Anton Vassallo's *Storia di Malta* (1854) falls within the above parameters. It is simultaneously rooted in the Italian romantic vision and at the same time it subscribes to the common sense and empiricist's perceptions. In this sense the book is without doubt his most important work<sup>1</sup> and the most successful history book to have been written in the nineteenth century. In his short academic career, Vassallo published a number of

VITA ED OPERE  
DEL FU PROFESSORE  
**Dr. GIO-ANTONIO VASSALLO.**

PER

**Paolo Ceraeo**

SUO ALLIEVO



MALTA,

*Tipografia Strada Federico No. 17.*

works both in Italian and Maltese on different subjects, from religious to literary criticism and poems. His medium varied from Italian to Maltese. Yet it was his *Storia di Malta* that was considered to be his major work during his lifetime to the extent of being re-published after his death, in 1890. A Maltese summarized version was published in 1862. Paolo Cesareo, one of Gio Anton Vassallo's pupils, and a leading nineteenth-century local critic, considered Vassallo's work as a masterpiece and to a certain extent superior to previous works, in particular, the works of Gio Francesco Abela and Onorato Bres.<sup>2</sup> Two other important critics, who praised Vassallo were Achille Ferris<sup>3</sup> and E. R. Leopardi. The nineteenth-century erudite scholar, Achille Ferris pointed out that *una storia completa delle isole di Malta mancava affatto, e la pazienza e la valentia del Dr. Vassallo si richiedevano per empire tale importantissima lacuna*.<sup>4</sup> Ferris insisted that his favourable judgement about Vassallo's history is not at all exaggerated but reflects the general opinion expressed in the local newspapers.<sup>5</sup> E.R. Leopardi belongs to a later school of critical analysis immersed in the Italian theories of 'verismo' but also influenced by the British Empirical School of philosophical thinking. Leopardi defined Vassallo's work as "a successful venture".<sup>6</sup>

The study of different theoretical approaches is nowadays becoming an increasingly important component in the study of history and Vassallo's history could not escape the judgement of contemporary historians. It is within this perspective that the historian Anthony Luttrell considered the *Storia di Malta* as a key-text in the nineteenth-century Maltese historiography to the extent of labelling it as "probably the most successful new work".<sup>7</sup> However, a comprehensive study of Vassallo's historical work has not yet been

1. Gio Antonio Vassallo's medium of publication varied between Italian and Maltese and his themes varied from historical and biographical articles in the journal called *Arte* to poems in Maltese or Italian in the journal *il Malti*. He also wrote a religious book and a novel. Some of Vassallo's works were: *Elia ed i Falsi Poeti, La Conversione Di Malta al Cristianesimo, Il Haija tal-Apostolu San Paul* (1858), *A San Lorenzo – Cantio, Il-Gifen Tork* epical poem, *Storia di Malta* (1854), *Gesu Cristo fid-Dinja* (1861), *Storia ta Malta miktuba Ghal Poplu Malti* (1862), *Hreief u Ciait* (1861), *Hreief u Ciait bil-Malti* (1863), and the novel *Inguanez*.
2. *Benchè il Bres e l'Abela ci abbiano lasciato un monumento di patria storia, pur le particolarità dettate minutamente dal Vassallo non si trovano così bene descritte*. P. Cesareo, *Omaggio e Vita del fu Professore Dr. Gio Antonio Vassallo*, (Malta, 1868), 22.
3. Ferris wrote: *di cui amicizia (Vassallo) grandemente mi onoro; L'Ordine, Venerdì 21 Maggio 1862*, 4.
4. A. Ferris, *Biografia del Dr. Gian Anton Vassallo Professore di Letteratura Italiana nell'Università di Malta*, (Malta, 1868), 14.
5. *Ibid.* 26.
6. E. R. Leopardi, 'Abela's work Throughout Three Centuries', *G. F. Abela Essays in his Honour by members of the "Maltese Historical Society" on the Third Century of his Death (1655-1955)*, (Malta, 1961).
7. A. T. Luttrell, "Approaches to Medieval Malta", ed. A.T. Luttrell, *Medieval Malta Studies on Malta before the Knights*, (London, 1975), 3.

undertaken. The above references reflect the type of considerations made on his works in the form of snippet analysis. Vassallo's work deserves a fundamental study which would place it within the mainstream of historiographic analysis. It is the aim of this paper to fill such a gap.

If one had to apply established methodologies of history and historiography to Vassallo's works, and insert the *Storia di Malta* in the heavyweight 'philosophical' discussions on what is history, the book would rightly qualify as a refreshing modern work. It reflects Giovanni Battista Vico's ideas of history. Vico, the founder of modern historiography whose ideas continued to be refracted and reflected up to our times, studied the rise and development of social structures (tribal and national groups), institutions (government, law and religion), cultural expressions (language, literature and art). Vassallo shaped these various competing and at the same time complementary theoretical perspectives to the Maltese context by adopting what Vico considered as the fundamental law of history, that is history is founded on events. These events were to be well recounted and clearly illustrated, anticipating what contemporary historians prefer to term as case studies. Vico insists, that only those events which can be applied fruitfully to the understanding of the present must be studied. Vassallo faithfully followed this advice and studied Maltese history in the context of what was first happening in Europe and the Mediterranean at that historical point in time. The historical discussion was then further expanded and some of the major events were discussed in the light of contemporary history.<sup>8</sup> Like Vico, Vassallo insisted upon the faithful use of documents, a notion that was further developed by Niebuhr, von Ranke and Lord Acton.

In his biography on Vassallo, Cesareo gave a succinct account of Vassallo's academic formation. Cesareo analysed Vassallo's work in the light of Tommaso Porcacchi's critical reviews on the writing of history. Reflecting M. Francesco Guiccardini's works, Porcacchi says that history has to be made of three elements; beauty, measurement and truth. Cesareo had no doubt that Vassallo based his history on these three romantic requirements.<sup>9</sup> Vassallo was not of the same opinion. He seems to have found it personally difficult to satisfy the first requirement as is shown in his comment in the end of the preface. Using Pliny's words, Vassallo commented that "*L'Istoria in qualunque modo narrata, piace*".<sup>10</sup> In fact, Vassallo himself maintains that he wrote "*senza pretensioni*",

8. The Consiglio Popolare, the language spoken by the Maltese and the election of Grandmaster Ximenes were discussed by Vassallo in the light of the turbulent political situation present in Malta in the first half of the nineteenth century. During this century, the Maltese elite put claims for the re-establishment of the medieval Consiglio Popolare or parliament, while the Austin and Lewis Report heralded the language question. The story of Ximenes was recounted by Vassallo as an example of the weight that the indigenous population carried on the political future of a country and the importance for the rulers to listen to popular opinion; 'trista l'urna che non accoglie il voto del popolo'. G. A. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta*, (Malta, 1890), 593.

9. Cesareo, 21.

10. Vassallo, (1890), xv.

and “*senza eleganza*”, so that he could satisfy his reader and in particular to induce young readers “*alle ricerche delle patrie cose*”.<sup>11</sup> These words reflect Vassallo’s academic modesty and unpretentious character. In reality, he had a skilful mastery of the Italian language, and somewhat of a penchant for a baroque Italian idiom, which were employed not only for stylistic purposes, but also in order to convey the subtlety of his arguments.

The use of Italian for the writing of history in an island where the majority of the population employed for their daily use a language of Semitic origins implies ulterior motives verging on what could be termed as a form of passive resistance to the newly established colonial administration on the Island. The language of the new rulers was English. Despite the fact that Vassallo was born in 1817, that is when Malta was already British, he received his education in the Latin-Italian-oriented tradition. At the age of six he was sent to the school of D. Gioacchino Attard, where he learned the basis of a number of Romance languages, in particular, Spanish, Italian, French and Latin. Interestingly, Vassallo also learned Arabic. At the age of fourteen he entered what in those days was termed the superior school, which was the threshold for those wanting to join University, which he eventually did in order to study law. His career as a teacher began at the Lyceum where he was, for some time, also examiner of Arabic. Afterwards, he was appointed lecturer of Italian and Latin literature at University. After the death of Professor D. Lorenzo Pullicino, he was given the chair of Italian. He knew French very well. In his *Storia di Malta*, he quotes and translates abstracts from the history of Malta of Miège, which is written in French.<sup>12</sup> Italian was at the time one of the most important languages of the Mediterranean. This partially explains why he used such a language for the writing of Maltese history. Additionally, Malta was not the sole Mediterranean country, where a foreign language was used for the writing of local history. In Dodekanisos too, during the War of Independence, Italian entered as the principal medium for the writing of Greek history.<sup>13</sup> A parallel movement to the one developing in Malta was taking place in another part of the Mediterranean. A sense of subtle resistance was slowly gaining force in Malta, which was being expressed in a written format. Through the use of Italian, the author was also creating a schmaltsy version of our local history, which was also intended to warn the new occupying rulers to treat Malta differently from the rest of their colonies.

In this spirit, Vassallo makes reference to the medieval *Consiglio Popolare* and links it to the claims made during his times for the setting up of a Council for Maltese representation. Vassallo uses the election of Grandmaster Ximenes to comment that *trista*

11. Ibid. xv.

12. Ibid. 568-9.

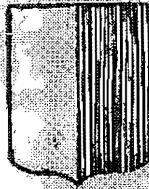
13. N. Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean. Remembering Fascism’s Empire*. (Macmillan, 1997).

# STORIA DI MALTA

RACCONTATA IN COMPENDIO

DA

**GIO. ANT. VASSALLO.**



MALTA

TIPOGRAFIA DI FRANCESCO GUMBO

1851.

*l'urna che non accoglie il voto del popolo*, in direct reference to the quest of the Maltese for an elective council.<sup>14</sup> Another contemporary event discussed in the *Storia di Malta* is the liberty of the press, which Vassallo highly praised, to the extent of considering it as a *concessione che innalza lo stato pubblico al maggior grado di dignità civile*.<sup>15</sup> Vassallo in his work also discusses the question of the Maltese language giving space to the question of whether the Italian words were corrupting the language or not,<sup>16</sup> and also making linguistic judgements, which today are not accepted by linguists; *divenne ... la più sonora bella tra le lingue parlate in Europa l'Italiana*.<sup>17</sup>

Despite all the Nationalistic considerations that the *Storia di Malta* has, Vassallo's main aim remained the search of what he considered as the historical truth. To better achieve this aim, Vassallo tried to rely as much as possible on documentation and in fact, his pupil Paolo Cesareo maintains that Vassallo ... *ha con pazienza e costanza incredibile svolto tutti i.m.s. antichi (alcuni dei quali difficili a leggere) esistente nella nostra Biblioteca*.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Vassallo quotes directly from the library's manuscripts collections, both for the Medieval and Early Modern section. He quotes manuscript no. 9 for the census carried out by the Spanish envoy Don Diego La Quatra,<sup>19</sup> manuscript no. 5 concerning the writing against three grandmasters whose surname ends in 'a' – Valletta, Verdala, de Paula,<sup>20</sup> manuscripts no. 239 for the *Vite de' G. Maestri* and no. 259 for the life of Grand Master Pinto<sup>21</sup> and Ransijat's manuscript no. 307 for the French blockade entitled *Assedio e Blocco di Malta*.<sup>22</sup> He also makes reference to two manuscripts by name, the *relazione* which Mons Visconti had written during Verdala's time<sup>23</sup> and another recounting the priests revolt,<sup>24</sup> unfortunately failing to give the relevant press mark.

One has also to add that Vassallo was faced with a serious drawback when it came to chronicling the Hospitaller history. At the time, the archives of the Hospitallers (AOM) did not form part of the National Library, with the consequence that they were not available for public consultation. It seems that Vassallo had personally asked the British Governor to give him access to this *fondo*. However, his plea was turned down by Governor Henry Bouverie (1836-1843). This finds reflection in his book's writing, where he criticized Governor Bouverie for not giving him the same treatment he gave Signor Bouchon, by

14. *Ibid.* (1890), 593.

15. G. A. Vassallo, *Storia di Malta*, (Malta, 1854), 170.

16. *Ibid.* 60.

17. *Ibid.* p. 73.

18. P. Cesareo, *Vita ed Opera del fu Professore Dr. Gio-Antonio Vassallo* Vassallo, 1890, xxx.

19. *Ibid.* 529.

20. *Ibid.* 552.

21. *Ibid.* 592.

22. *Ibid.* 628-9.

23. *Ibid.* 522.

24. *Ibid.* 596.

putting at his disposal documents, which were in possession of the Government, so that he could, like Signor Bouchon, use the same archival material for the chapters on Hospitaller Malta.<sup>25</sup> Vassallo was here specifically referring to the so-called AOM section or that series of documentation which historically formed part of the archives of the Hospitallers' chancellery. Thus Vassallo had only access to one type of archival material, that of the library collection, known in Malta as the NLM Libr. series. It clearly transpires from Vassallo's comments that during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Knights of Saint John's archives, that is the AOM section, was not yet part of the Valletta Public Library and as a result it was not easily accessible to the general public. Instead, the AOM series was housed in one of the buildings of Valletta that had been previously taken over by the British for administrative purposes, with the result that the consultation of these documents precluded a special permission from the British governor. Despite the fact that Vassallo expressed pro-liberal sentiments which sometimes even verged to express an overt detestation of the Hospitallers' despotism, he was still refused access to these documents, presumably, due to the fact that his sentiments and political ideals appeared to be too radical for the British Authorities who were not yet ready to digest sentiments pertaining to the French Enlightenment.

Vassallo filled this gap by quoting from the above-mentioned collection of the library manuscripts or by relying on secondary sources. The first work to be extensively used by Vassallo for the Hospitaller History is Giacomo Bosio's *Historia*. This is followed by Bartolomeo dal Pozzo's<sup>26</sup> work, the manuscripts of Imbroil and his nephew Carlo Micallef. He also refers to contemporary books, in particular the works of L De Caro, *Storia dei Cavalieri e G. Maestri di Malta*, Abbe Berault-Bercastel for the Siege of Malta, M. Thiers for the *Histoire de la Revolution Francaise* and Ludovico Muratori's *Codice Diplomatico del Sacro Ordine*. Additionally, he quotes from L. Papi<sup>27</sup> and Thomas Salmon<sup>28</sup> for a commentary on corsairing activities. He also employed the works of Gio Francesco Abela, *Descrittione di Malta* and to a lesser extent Ciantar's *Malta Illustrata*. Both were used for the reconstruction of both the medieval and early modern Maltese history. Ignazio Panzavecchia's *Ultimo Periodo della Storia di Malta sotto il governo dell'Ordine*, in particular its analytical but at the same time revealing new evidence on these events which the author had lived through, provided Vassallo with valuable information on the last decades of Hospitaller rule in Malta. *Il Giornale della presa di Malta dalla Repubblica Francese* of Baron Vincenzo Azzopardi was employed as a Maltese counterpart for Ransijat's chronicle of the history of the capitulation of Malta to Napoleon Bonaparte.

25. Ibid. 1854, 85.

26. Ibid. 1890, 539.

27. Ibid. 580.

28. T. Salmon, *Lo Stato presente di tutti i paesi e popoli del mondo, naturale, politico e morale con nuove osservazioni e correzioni degli antichi e moderni viaggiatori*. (Venice, 1739; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).



The desire of Vassallo to write nothing but the truth impelled him to approach past historical writings with a critical eye. In this he differed from the way other contemporary and past historians pursued the writing of Maltese history. Vassallo confessed to have approached history scientifically and criticized previous writers *dei fasti della sacra Milizia* for *non seppero mai allontanarsi d'un passo dalla parte brillante della epopea*.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Vassallo criticized Sig. Gio Antonio Micallef<sup>30</sup> for not distancing himself from the mode of history as legend. Vassallo accused him of uncritical reproduction of events given by Caffari, who in turn had repeated what Muratori had written in his description in "fatti d'Italia" concerning our high medieval history. Even the early modern period, which is an epoch in the writing of our history that is not swamped with facts made out of fabricated legends, was put under the lens of analytical history. Vassallo demonstrated a critical mind and warned future historians about both Imbroli's and his nephew *Commendatore* Carlo Micallef's works concerning the epopee of Hospitaller history. According to Vassallo, these works have to be read with great cautiousness. One had to be extremely careful on following their footsteps because '*tutti e due storici*' were in Vassallo's opinion, '*panegiristi*'.<sup>31</sup> More importantly, Vassallo ignored those writers who tried to fill the historical vacuum by historical fabrications.<sup>32</sup> Maybe this could explain why Vassallo never quotes from Abate Vella's forged documents and published in the book entitled the *Consiglio di Egitto*, and in which Vella gave documents supposedly concerning the Island of Malta during the Arabic period.

Vassallo gave an European historical background in his book, by using other authors beside Ludovico Muratori for the reconstruction of Malta's medieval pass. He quoted Muller for the history of the Arabs, Michele Amari for the history of Sicily and De Burigny<sup>33</sup> with regard to the advent of the *House of Anjou* in Italy. Other authors referred to by Vassallo for the writing of the Maltese medieval history are Dr. G. Laferla<sup>34</sup> for his book *Cenni Storici sullo Scudo Stendardo Maltese* and Chev-Saint Priest's work for the study of the Svevi in Malta.<sup>35</sup> Vassallo made reference to European and Mediterranean history and recounted the story of the rise of Islam, the Sicilian Vespers, besides biographies of kings and queens who had any relation with Malta, as the family story of Count Roger Hauteville, the family story of the Kings of Anjou and then the life of the

29. Vassallo, 1890, xiv.

30. G. A. Micallef, *Riflessioni Storiche-Critiche sull'Isola di Malta durante il cessato Governo Gerosolimitano ed il presente governo britannico* (Malta, 1839).

31. The full phrase in Italian is as follows 'vuolsi bensì cautela nel camminare sulle orme loro, perocché tutti e due storici panegiristi'. Vassallo, 1890, 508

32. *Taluni si sono immaginati di riempirne qualche vacuo, appoggiandosi a congetture ed induzioni del che non oso fidarmi.* Ibid, xii.

33. J. Levesque de Burigny, *Storia Generale di Sicilia, translated and updated by E. Scasso and Borrello*, 6 Vols. (Palermo, 1792-94).

34. G. Laferla, *Cenni Storici Sullo Scudo Stendardo Maltese*, (Malta, 1841).

35. F. E. de Guignard Count de Saint Priest, *Malte par un Voyageur Français*, 1791.

AI  
SUOI CONCITTADINI  
IL TENUE LAVORO  
DEDICA  
L'AUTORE



kings and queens of Aragon, while for the early modern part, he gave an extensive reading of the history of the Hospitaller Order, including a short biography on each and every Grand Master. He made reference to the Lutheran schism, entered into some detail on the history of the Knights of Saint John in England,<sup>36</sup> and made reference to Turkish history, in particular to the Ottoman war with Persia at the turn of the eighteenth century,<sup>37</sup> and finally to the French Revolution. Vassallo discussed in detail the donation of the islands of Malta to the knights of Saint John within the general policy of Charles V. One of the books consulted was by Adolfo Slade, who wrote that Charles V was forced to give Malta to the knights for financial motives, an assertion that Vassallo refuted. He considered that the real motive behind Charles V's decision was purely military.<sup>38</sup>

The quotation and careful accreditation of his documents (even if he does not give any page numbers) differentiate Vassallo from some previous historians. He liked to provide references and often comments on the material quoted. Vassallo did not copy Miège, whom he often criticized for quoting other historians and documents and then rarely giving any references or Castagna, who plagiarised from other authors.<sup>39</sup> However, one has to conclude that his historical approach is not without flaws in particular when it comes to the medieval period, where he himself also relied for information on Rocco Pirri, whose work Luttrell<sup>40</sup> describes as full of errors.

### The Historical Approach

The book *Storia di Malta* can be divided into three sections; the first part covers what Vassallo terms as 'Epoca Antica', that is from what we now call pre-history, but which Vassallo considered as the Phoenician era, to the fall of the Roman Empire. The second part is the 'Epoca Media', that is from the Byzantine period until 1530. The third and last part focused on what the author termed 'Epoca Recente', that is from the arrival of the Hospitallers until the Treaty of Paris in 1814, by which Malta became definitively British. This paper will focus primarily on the 'Epoca Media' and 'Epoca Recente'.

36. Vassallo, 1890, 270-1, 305-6.

37. Ibid. 581.

38. *Slade diceva che Carlo V era spinto a dare Malta ai Cavalieri da motivi finanziari. Malta pesava sulla corona Spagnola.* On the other hand, Vassallo had a different opinion. He thought that Charles V had given Malta to the Knights of Saint John *per motivi militari* as *L'Ordine era consagrato per la difesa della cristianità.* Ibid. 266.

39. *Kabel ma nispiedu mis-Saracini, jahtieg illi nghidu; illi daun in-nies, ma kenux boloh bhal Gharab misilmin tal-lum: kienu nies kawia, hawtiela, jahdmu, jafu s-snaja, ix-xienzi u bosta minnhom ghorrief cbar: ...* P.P. Castagna, *Lis Storia ta Malta bil Gzejjer Tahha*, Vol. II, ed. (Malta, 1890) 68. Vassallo wrote on the same lines in his Maltese edition of the history of Malta. ... *dan in-nies ma chienux boloh bhal Gharab misilmin tal-lum, chienu nies kauuia, hawtiela, jahdmu, jafu is-snaja, chien hem ucoll fostom il ghorrief..* G.A. Vassallo, *Storia ta Malta*, (Malta, 1862) 32.

40. Luttrell, 1975, 2.

Vassallo acknowledged the difficulty which any scholar who wants to study our Medieval past is forced to encounter, that is the lack of historical documentation. In fact Vassallo was conscious of this drawback as he expressed that for Maltese Medieval History “*vi rimangono in diversi stadi della nostra istoria certe lacune che non si possono riempire attesa mancanza di registri storici*”.<sup>41</sup> As has been shown in a revised and updated version of our Medieval past, recently published by Charles Dalli, the lack of documentation constrains historians to outline the period from the sixth to the thirteenth century by snippets on Malta’s political history, while the economic and the social aspects can be mentioned (if at all) in short passing comments.

Vassallo arguably wrote the best rendition of the pre-Arab and Arab period up to that time. In a situation where there is lack of documentation and the “*tenebre*” that surround the medieval period “*non incominciano a dirandare prima del secolo nono*”,<sup>42</sup> Vassallo refused to accept most received tradition, which is ultimately traceable to the work of Gio Francesco Abela. Instead, he preferred to rely on the few published documents of the period, namely Procopius’s abstract on Malta, and reinterpret the known facts. The first part to be reviewed and reinterpreted covers the period of foreign rule stretching from the fall of the Roman Empire to the arrival of the Arabs in 870. He says that both local and foreign historians *v’incontrano i Vandali ed i Goti e brevi dimore nel secolo quinto, aimè però, fatte accurate indagini, non riuscii di stabilire con certezza la dominazione dei così detti popolari barbari*.<sup>43</sup>

Sir Augusto Bartolo points out that Abela was the first one to say that the Islands fell in the hands of the Vandals in 454 and in 464 they were conquered by the Goths, from whom Belisario recaptured them on his expedition against Gelimer.<sup>44</sup> Later historians copied blindly Abela’s interpretation. Augustus Bartolo while stating that Vassallo was the first to disapprove Abela’s assertion on the basis of lack of documentation, defended Abela and said that Abela’s work became a point of reference for practically all subsequent histories and was acknowledged accurate until more careful native historians came along.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, Vassallo questions what had been written about the Goths’ and the Vandals’ possession of the Maltese Islands.<sup>46</sup> Confronted with lack of documentation, Vassallo affirms that *prima degli arabi, nulla si nota a Malta*. Vassallo rightly questions if Belisario landed in Malta or just passed near the island, and if his stay on the island was of a day’s duration, *che cosa mai avrebbe potuto fare Belisario nello spazio di un giorno?*<sup>47</sup> Vassallo also shows doubts about the fact that, Genserico the King of the Vandals had invaded

41. Vassallo, 1890, xii.

42. Ibid. xiii.

43. Ibid. xii.

44. G. F. Abela, *Descrittione di Malta*, (Malta, 1647), 242 – 251.

45. A. Bartolo, ‘History of the Maltese Islands’, *Malta and Gibraltar*, ed. Macmillan, (London, 1915), 45.

46. Ibid. 3.

47. Ibid. 34.

Malta on his way to invading North Africa.<sup>48</sup> He was of the opinion that the occupation of Sicily together with some other islands by the Ostrogoths does not really mean that Malta was also occupied by this new military force. Malta, Vassallo insisted, is not specifically mentioned.<sup>49</sup> Further, no archaeological or other form of evidence as architectural remains has survived as evidence to attest to the presence of the Vandals or Goths in Malta. Vassallo maintained that due to this lack of visible or written evidence, we cannot speak with certainty on that period.<sup>50</sup>

Modern research has shown that both Abela and Caruana were right when they said that Malta was ruled by the Vandals. However, Abela's source, as Vassallo points out, does not lead to the conclusion that Malta was under Visigoth rule. T. S. Brown in his article on Byzantine Malta wrote that the fact that Malta was under Byzantine rule "can only be inferred from a passage of Victor Bishop of Vita in North Africa, written at the end of the fifth century,"<sup>51</sup> and not, as Abela said, from Procopius' writing.

### Muslim Malta

Vassallo gave the year 870 as the date in which Malta was conquered *dagli Arabi o Saraceni*, when they were in the *fiore della loro grandezza*.<sup>52</sup> Vassallo did not accept the 870 assumption blindly but only as it had been confirmed in the Chronicle of Cambridge. Modern historiography has thrown doubts about the exact date of the Muslim invasion. Wettinger holds that "apparently ... in 870 Malta was already in Muslim hands. However, the precise date remains doubtful."<sup>53</sup>

When discussing the Arabs' invasion of Malta, Vassallo spoke of two other probable Muslim assaults in 833 and 836 A.D. The source of this information is based on Vincenzo Bonavita's manuscript which was quoted by Miège. However, Bonavita's manuscripts present a serious historiographic problem; they are considered unreliable because the information was taken from the fabrications of Abate Vella.<sup>54</sup> Vassallo cast doubts on the reliability of these historical events. He wrote that *prezioso sarebbe stato il ragguaglio del cronista, ove egli ci avesse indicato le fonti di tale notizie, e pero non mi sembra ch'egli abbia ogni titolo alla fede dei leggitori, in riguardo specialmente della prima invasione*.<sup>55</sup> In the light of the above statement, Wettinger's criticism against Vassallo for having been misled as Miège by Abate Vella's fabrications into accepting the would

48. Ibid.

49. The same view about Belisario and Genserico was also expressed by T. S. Brown in his article on Byzantine Malta. T.S. Brown, 'Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources', ed. A.T. Luttrell, *Medieval Malta 'Studies on Malta before the Knights'*, (London, 1975), 73.

50. Vassallo, 1854, 3.

51. Brown, 71.

52. Vassallo, 41.

53. G. Wettinger, *The Arabs in Malta*, (Malta, 1986), 88.

54. Brown, 82. Wettinger, 1986, 90.

55. Vassallo, 1890, 43.

# STORIA DI MALTA

IN TRE VOLUMI

GIÒ ANTONIO VASSALLO



Ediz. 1852  
G. B. Parnis  
G. B. Parnis  
Salita S. Francesco, Al. 25, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100  
1850

be Muslim assaults in 833 and 836 is unfair<sup>56</sup>. Vassallo did not acknowledge the 833 invasion. He accepted only the second invasion of 836 which for him *in qualche modo viene confermata* by the fact that *isole adigenti all'Italia erano teatro di confine tra greci e arabi*.

Vassallo rules out what some historians have said to the effect that the *Maltese mal soddisfatti dei greci, avessero amicamente accolto gli arabi, nemici naturali di quelli e di questi*.<sup>57</sup> Vassallo's assertion seems to be correct because one year after the Muslims took Malta, the Maltese joined hands with the Byzantines in an attempt to throw the Arabs out. However, the venture was a complete failure. Considering the customs of the time, one would expect harsh retaliation against the inhabitants.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, Vassallo's assertion that the Greeks were massacred and their wives and children were sold into slavery is pure speculation. Vassallo accepts the assertion that the Maltese accepted Arab rule because they could do nothing when faced with the tyrannical behaviour of the new conquerors.

The assertion of difficult times for the inhabitants under Arab or better Muslim rule presented a difficulty to Vassallo. His nationalistic spirit, where the essence of nationhood was intertwined with religion, infringed Vico's ideal of using history as the mother of all learning for comprehending contemporary politics. The identification of Malta with the Arab world denigrated in the eyes of Vassallo and his contemporaries the Islands' cultural prestige but their claims of 'nationhood', was at the time a political concept too tightly linked with Europe. The Arab rule distanced Malta from the European motherland. Vassallo sought to deny such a cultural susceptibility by affirming that during this period Christianity *si trovasse in misera condizione durante quel tristo governo*.<sup>59</sup> Vassallo rules out the assertion that *la condizione di queste isole non fosse infelice sotto la dominazione di questi (Arabs); che infine gli arabi avessero rispettato i costumi e la religione dei nostri*.<sup>60</sup> According to Vassallo, Abela tried without success to find out the names of the Bishop of Malta for this period. But unlike Sicily, the list of our bishops during three or more centuries of Muslim rule remains unknown. This could mean that Sicily retained its Christianity while Malta turned Muslim, and if Christianity was practised at all, it was in Vassallo's opinion that it was practised underground and in catacombs.

The effort to prove the survival of Christianity in what Vassallo considered difficult times induced him to reproduce fragments of a letter published by Pirri, which is attributed to the monk Teodosio. In the letter, Teodosio states that the Bishop of Malta, Manas,

56. Wettinger, 1986, 90.

57. Vassallo, 1854, 43.

58. Wettinger, 1986, 90; Luttrell, 1975, 26.

59. Vassallo, 1854, 47.

60. Ibid. 45.

was chained in Palermo.<sup>61</sup> This, for Vassallo, is another link in the chain of facts showing that Christian practice was not tolerated. However, it seems that Teodosio's letter is a fraud. T.S. Brown comments that "no Maltese Bishop of this name is recorded in that council's acta, and Pirri's identification is unwarranted."<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Vassallo sought to build his historical arguments on the basis of the placename "Wied ir-Rum" and Malaterra's account of the liberation of a Christian community. Vassallo's definition of "Wied ir-Rum" is taken from Abela's work, and the word 'rum' is linked to the Arab and Ottoman word of the same pronunciation used for Oriental Christians.<sup>63</sup>

Yet, Vassallo is not afraid to speak of the Muslim heritage in Malta and shows that the vernacular origins of our language dates to the Muslim domination. The old oriental dialect, derived from Phoenicians, was during this period replaced by Arabic, the language of the new rulers. Vassallo compares what happened in Malta with what had happened in North Africa and in Syria, where a Phoenician dialect was spoken before the Muslims took over. Vassallo is not the first to make such a claim. Abela also held that Maltese is an Arabic dialect and like Vassallo even tried to explain why in Malta the Arabic dialect remained spoken, while in Sicily it died out.<sup>64</sup> Contemporary history writers sought to belittle this fact either by denouncing that Maltese was of Arabic origins or else, as was the case with Pietro Paolo Castagna, making a simple reference to the derivation of Maltese, without giving this fact any due importance. On the other hand, Vassallo considered the language as *il monumento piu' grande, vivo, incontestabile, che ci hanno lasciato gli arabi*.<sup>65</sup> Later writers, as A.E. Caruana,<sup>66</sup> Annibale Preca,<sup>67</sup> Sir T. Zammit,<sup>68</sup> and Sir Augustus Bartolo,<sup>69</sup> probably due to the political tension prevailing in Malta at their time, returned to the Phoenician theory of the origins of the Maltese language, a theory which had been already put forward by Vassalli and before him by De Soldanis.

### The Late Medieval Period

The end of the Muslim period and the subsequent Norman Conquest is one of the most tantalising subjects of Maltese history. In his groundbreaking book, *Malta fi Żmien Nofsani*, Charles Dalli makes a cognitive analysis of this period and shows how the

61. Vassallo, 1854, 46.

62. Brown, 78.

63. Abela, 261.

64. Ibid. 257.

65. Vassallo, 1890, 50.

66. A. E. Caruana, *Sull'origine della lingua maltese: studio storico etnografico e filologico*, (Malta, 1896), 243-305.

67. A. Preca, *Malta Cananea, ossia investigazioni filologiche – etimologiche nel linguaggio maltese*, (Malta, 1904).

68. T. Zammit, *The Maltese Islands and Their History*, (Malta, 1971), 77.

69. Bartolo, 63-64.



Arab or Muslim period extended much more in time than it was supposed to have done by past historians, including Vassallo himself. Most (if not all) the nineteenth and early twentieth-century historians had a genuine interest in terminating this 'dark' part of Maltese history, in which the islands lived an existence forcibly distant from the European motherland. Vassallo's Norman Malta is perhaps the worst historical part of his whole work. In the romantic vision, this event exceeds in importance any other story of conquest in Maltese history. It was without doubt, a turning point in Maltese Medieval historiography. Looking at the year 1090 as the point in time of the re-Europeanisation of Malta, it became in the emerging romantic cult the point of no return to our European cradle; the moment when Count Roger re-united Malta with the Christian culture of Europe.<sup>70</sup> However, this great event is surrounded by a vacuum of documentation, which Vassallo tries with great difficulty to overcome by relying on tradition, tradition that was recorded by Abela, and by justifying Abela's reproduced legends through the study of Maltese nomenclature. In other words, Vassallo ends up jeopardizing his own words regarding the tools that any historian has to use in accessing and recounting the past as it really was.

Post-modern historians consider that historical 'truth' is unachievable and deny the possibility of any realistic grasp of history. Such an affirmation becomes particularly apt in the contexts of a discussion of nineteenth-century historians, whose urge to establish the 'truth' made them accept as facts even fiction, legends or stories of received tradition. To achieve such an end, nineteenth-century historiography permitted and allowed what can be defined as a form of naïve empiricism. In using legends to assess the past, Vassallo was following in the wake of one of the stalwarts of the nationalistic movement, Herder. Herder urged his contemporaries to seek beneath the surface of the official records, to find the spirit of culture. According to Herder, the historian should listen to the "voices of the people", and consequently, his material should include the archives of the people, that is their songs, legends and art. Vassallo gave significant space to these folk legends, in particular if they had been recorded by past historians.

One can rightly conclude that Vassallo's historical approach to the re-Christianisation of Malta is something of a jackdaw subject, with a tendency to appropriate stories and concepts that have no solid historical basis. Therefore, Vassallo can sound a bit unfair in his criticism of Micallef for accepting blindly historical information about the pre-Arabic period when he himself did the same when recounting the advent of Count Roger's liberation of Malta from what popular culture labelled as the Saracen domination. The arrival of Count Roger is described in a very poetical way,<sup>71</sup> and it is more an epical story than an historical fact. Count Roger is said to have disembarked at Miġra l-Ferħa and was welcomed at Wied ir-Rum on his way to Rabat in the same way as Christ was

70. *Ibid.* xiv.

71. Vassallo, 1854, 65.

# STORIA TA MALTA

## MIGTUBA GHAL POPLU

MIN

### G. A. VASSALLO



### MALTA

*Tipografia Fratelli Bonello.*

1862.



welcomed when he entered Jerusalem but instead of the singing of “Hosanna in Excelsis”, the “Kyrie Eleison” was loudly sung. The Christian captives welcomed the count with palm and olive branches and kept crosses in their hands. However, the interpretation of this story is incorrect as is also incorrect the interpretation of the place name *Migra el-Ferħa* as given by Vassallo, which he interpreted as standing for the joyful event of the arrival of Count Roger to Malta. Geographically *Migra il-Ferħa* is an inlet exposed to the wind and surrounded on all sides by cliffs. Such terrain is very unsuitable for any disembarkation. Further, according to Joseph Cassar Pullicino, *Migra el-Ferħa* literally means “a small watercourse”<sup>72</sup> and has nothing to do with the arrival of Count Roger as Vassallo explained it. The interpretation given by Vassallo that Count Roger was welcomed at *Wied ir-Rum* with the singing of Kyrie Eleison is also erroneous. According to Malaterra such a welcome was given outside Mdina by the *captivi christiani*. “This legend evidently provides another instance of folk etymology, an attempt to explain the strange word Rum, derived from “Rome”, which is used by the Arabs to designate Christians, both Latin and Greek”.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, Luttrell says that it is debatable if the word “Rum” refers more generally to Christians or specifically to Greeks.<sup>74</sup> Following the footsteps of Abela, Vassallo mistakenly attributed the words *captivi christiani* to local Christians. The first to cast doubts on this interpretation was Mayr in 1896,<sup>75</sup> and Dr. Wettinger interpreted the “captivi” as “only... foreign Christians”.<sup>76</sup>

Vassallo strongly believed that in the understanding of the present one could not escape the past. It was on this basis that he linked the engendering of Malta as a nation to the eleventh century, more exactly to the Norman Conquest. This idea simply reflects the nationalistic movement of his time, in which Vassallo formed an integral part. Malta was being placed on a par with bigger European countries who also sought to link the origins of their nationhood to the European High Middle Ages. Vassallo needed historical proofs which he found in Dr. G. Laferla’s works.<sup>77</sup> Laferla was quoted for the donation of *emblemi particolari*, and *proprietà nazionali* by Count Roger.<sup>78</sup> Further, in a summary he wrote for the medieval period, Vassallo seemed to accept the account that Roger gave the Maltese their national colours, when he wrote that in the harbour of Birgu, by the time of the arrival of the Order, there were *un considerevole numero di navigli su cui sventolava il glorioso stendardo del Conte Ruggero*.<sup>79</sup> This fact of the flag “is now universally acknowledged in academic quarters as an impossibility.”<sup>80</sup>

72. J. Cassar Pullicino, ‘Norman Legends in Malta’, *Scientia*, Vol. xi, no. 4, 155.

73. *Ibid.* 156-157.

74. Luttrell, 1976, 24.

75. A. Mayr, “Zur Geschichte der alteren chrislichen Kirche von Malta”, *Historisches Fahrbuch*, xvii, 1896

76. Wettinger, 1986, 97.

77. Laferla.

78. Vassallo, 1854, 69.

79. *Ibid.*, 271.

80. Wettinger, 1986, 98.

Furthermore, a number of facts mentioned by Vassallo - that the name of Fort St. Angelo dated from Count Roger's time, that Roger I garrisoned it, restored the fortifications of Imdina, made Malta a diocese, rebuilt and decorated the Cathedral which was in ruins - are not supported by a shred of evidence.<sup>81</sup> Luttrell also denies what he called the tradition which even Vassallo mentions that *era essa da lunghi anni senza pastore, ed il Conte presento S.S. Urban II un pio sacerdote a nome Gualtieri, il quale fu dal Pontefice consacrato, ed ebbe la cura della nostra diocesi con generosi assegnamenti da parte del conte.*<sup>82</sup> According to Luttrell, this tradition had its origin in Rocco Pirri's history.<sup>83</sup>

The search for historical justification for nineteenth-century political claims led Vassallo to wrongly attribute the setting up of the Consiglio Popolare to Count Roger. He quotes in great detail what the historian Christoforo d'Avelas had to say about the Consiglio Popolare; *La sicurezza individuale delle persone, quella della proprietà, ed il godimento di tutt' i diritti della libertà civile, vennero ai Maltesi garantiti per la istituzione del Consiglio Popolare, istituzione che rimonta fino all' anno 1090.*<sup>84</sup> Without contradicting D' Avelos, Vassallo says that Roger founded *un governo... su principj quanto equi, altrettanto liberali.*<sup>85</sup> He continues to say that Roger was *acclamato signore delle isole per l'unanime voto della popolazione nativa,*<sup>86</sup> and established in Malta, as there was in Sicily a government, *cui poscia gli abitanti denominarono Consiglio Popolare.*<sup>87</sup> However, Vassallo seems also uncertain about these facts because when it comes to documentation, he says that *non s'incontrano, sfortunatamente, tracce di amministrazione civile prima dell' anno 1350.*<sup>88</sup> However, he seems to accept the tradition that Count Roger set up a parliament in Malta because in a summarised history of the Middle Ages, he repeats the fact that Count Roger set up a parliament on the Island.<sup>89</sup> Cassar Pullicino maintains that the attribution of the *Consiglio Popolare* to Count Roger is only legend.<sup>90</sup> Recently studies on the Arab period of Malta showed that Malta was not liberated from the Arabs in 1091, as Vassallo would like his readers to believe but only after they had been expelled from Malta by King Roger in 1127.<sup>91</sup> Until that

81. Ibid.

82. Vassallo, 1890, 55.

83. Luttrell, 1975, 32.

84. Vassallo, 1854, 66.

85. Ibid. 68.

86. Ibid. 66.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid. 68.

89. Ibid. 261.

90. Cassar Pullicino, 159-160.

91. Vassallo was conscious of this fact. In fact, he warns his readers against the mistake committed by some historians by saying *che gli arabi vennero scacciati dal Conte, sbaglio avvertito bene dal Muratori.* Vassallo, 1854, 65.

date, the Arabs remained virtually the rulers of the island after accepting to pay a tribute to the new Norman rulers. In such a situation it is improbable that a *Consiglio Popolare* could have been set up between the year 1091 and 1127. Yet, it is unthinkable that Malta was endowed with some form of local government, even immediately after the expulsion of the Arabs. The latter event did not change much the religious character of Malta. The island remained predominantly Muslim for many more decades to come.<sup>92</sup>

In the light of the above, one is tempted to think that Vassallo's aim in discussing the *Consiglio Popolare* was derived from contemporary political circumstances. His aim of using history as a model for how a nineteenth-century local government was elected becomes an overt one once he discusses the composition of the supposedly medieval *Consiglio Popolare*, in which its members were elected by the head of every family.<sup>93</sup> One has to remember that at his time, Maltese agitators as Camillo Sceberas and Giorgio Mitrovich were strongly insisting on the re-establishment of the *Consiglio Popolare*, on the basis of its acclaimed Medieval existence.

The establishment of Norman rule in Malta was seen as having secured freedom of worship to the Christian community on the island, and the inhabitants were thereafter all too keen to guard their newly-acquired liberty. Within this context Vassallo accepts the legend of *Ghain Klieb*, in which, according to tradition, the Maltese with the shouting of "At the Dogs! At the Dogs!" attacked and surrounded the Arabs, before they could execute their plot to overthrow the Norman government. This story has been rejected by modern historians. Andrew Vella tells us that "Ghain Klieb" is an Arabic place name to be found in Palestine.<sup>94</sup>

### The Post-Norman Period

The discussion of the post-Norman period contains a narrow geopolitical outlook peppered for the first time with glimpses of materialist philosophy of history, besides the fact that history writing would re-enter into the domain of empirical veracity. The author would once again address questions of sources and causation but without losing his touch for moral judgements and reflections. The latter would become the leitmotif of the third section 'Epoca Recente'. The only instance when this rhythm is lost is when he discusses ecclesiastical history. The urge to link religion to the new concept of Maltese nationalism made him lose the sense of historical proportion.

The first story to be seriously questioned by Vassallo, on the basis of documentation is the supposed Maltese participation against the Muslim forces in Gibellotto in Africa. According to Gio Antonio Micallef, *i maltesi nel 1205 con tal eroico coraggio, che in numero di tre cento respinsero venti e più migliaia di turchi e saraceni, li costrinsero*

92. C. Dalli, *Iz-Żmien Nofsani Malti*, (Malta, 2002), 37.

93. Vassallo, 1854, 262.

94. A. P. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, (Malta, 1984), 80.

# STORJA TA' MALTA

MIKTUBA GHALL-POPOLU

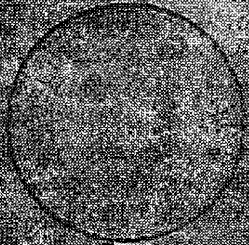
MINN

DR. GAN ANTO VASSALLO

ESKIZZJONJI UFFISWILJ

MINN

SALVU IAGIUS



MALTA  
GIOV. MUSSCAT

*ad una vergognosa fuga e liberarono dall'assedio il Castello di Gibellotto nell'Africa* Vassallo rightly concludes that it could be historically true that the Maltese had fought in Africa, but else *è canto da poeti*<sup>95</sup>. Abulafia in his article on Henry Count of Malta mentions the fact that the Maltese had participated in a battle in Tripoli against the rebellious castle of Nefin and Abulafia, like Vassallo, thinks that the chronicler probably exaggerated the facts in claiming that there were 300 Maltese facing 20,000 saracens.<sup>96</sup>

Vassallo's main source for the post-Arab period, as in the case of the early medieval, is Abela, but Abela for that period, *e piu precisamente tra il 1200 e il 1430... é caduto in affermazioni errate, in costruzioni su fragili basi, in lacune palesi e in grossolani paralogismi*,<sup>97</sup> with the result that Abela *"ha creato un alone di confusione"*.<sup>98</sup>

The only flaw to the above statement is when it comes to ecclesiastical history. Vassallo could not resist relying on Abela for the list of the ecclesiastical authorities for the post Norman period, with the result that he replicated the errors committed by Abela in his list of bishops – a list which Abela took from Rocco Pirri; Vassallo mentions Riccardo, Corrado Caracciolo, Francesco Campolo, Antonio Platamone, Bernardino Paterno, Carlo Urries and Baldassare Waltkirk as being bishops of Malta.

According to Fiorini, there is no evidence to prove the existence of the above-mentioned bishops as bishops of Malta. This is due to the fact that Pirri consulted the wrong source, the Real Cancelleria. The Holy See, according to Fiorini, should have been consulted, being the body that appointed the bishops.<sup>99</sup> However, Luttrell comments that Fiorini's work "still requires much amendments."<sup>100</sup> However, Abela is not accepted blindly by Vassallo. This is shown by Vassallo's corrections or comments on Abela's work.<sup>101</sup> Pirri's contention, which was reproduced in Abela, that the Maltese diocese between 1206 and 1284 was in the hands of Maltese bishops, is considered by Vassallo as possibly correct on the basis that Charles of Anjou did not favour Sicilian bishops. However, on such an early period there is lack of material and all that is known is a few names of bishops and that the bishops rarely resided in or even visited the Islands, as Vassallo himself hinted by mentioning a letter sent on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1499, by the Viceroy Giovanni de la Nuza, to order the Bishop to visit Malta *"almeno nel tempo della consacrazione del Crisma."* Commenting on this letter, Vassallo says that he only

95. Vassallo, 1854, 86.

96. D. Abulafia, 'Henry Count of Malta', *Medieval Malta Studies of Malta Before the Knights*, ed. A.T. Luttrell, (London, 1975), 112-113.

97. B. Fiorini, 'Il Commendatore Abela e La Cronologia Episcopale di Malta', *G. F. Abela Essays in his Honour by members of the "Maltese Historical Society" on the Third Century of his Death (1655-1955)*, (Malta, 1961), 83.

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.* 87.

100. Luttrell, 61.

101. Vassallo, 1854, 124 and 159.

saw a *copia troppo malamente trascritta dell'originale spagnuolo*,<sup>102</sup> with the result that he could not reproduce an exact translation of the whole document.

Outside the dominion of religion, Vassallo worked within the exact rules and parameters required for the writing of history. He is in the historian's workshop in particular when addressing questions defined by postmodernists as charismatic politics. He considered the account about the concession of Malta as a "*contea ereditoria*" to Nicola Acciaiuoli as his main contribution to Medieval Maltese history. The story goes to 1357, when Luigi and Giovanna of Sicily, for whom Nicolo' Acciaiuoli had conquered nearly all Sicily, decided to endow the latter with the islands of Malta. Vassallo comments on this fact and insists that *tutto quanto si è finora scritto intorno a questo periodo nell'istoria di Malta è pieno di errori, ciò naturalmente perchè non si erano estratti i documenti autentici dagli archivi*.<sup>103</sup> He continues to say that all these facts<sup>104</sup> had been *finora sconosciuti, sono approvati da atti originali, autentici, depositati negli archivi Ricasoli e da lettere autografe di famiglia scritte dai diversi Conti e Contesse di Malta, esistente nei medesimi archivi*.<sup>105</sup>

Within the framework of charismatic politics falls also the story of the lease of the islands of Malta to Monroy. The latter story occurred between 1421 and 1425. One has to notice that the pursuit of history in Vassallo's *Storia* intensifies in the debate on fifteenth-century Malta. The availability of documentation permitted him to be scholarly, with the result that this period is the most detailed episode in all his medieval history. The story of Monroy shows how much Vassallo was genuinely in search to establish what he considered to be the historical truth. Vassallo tried to check the reliability of Miège's valuable account on the rebellion of the Maltese against Monroy, but because he did not find such accounts *negli archivi del passato governo formanti parte in oggi dell'ufficio del Principal Secretario*,<sup>106</sup> he rightly decided not to quote him.

Political history continues to have pride of place but it is supplemented by reflections on the origins on Maltese parishes as well as a short text on social history. Thus, Vassallo gave a seminal history of the Dejma regiment, its function, constitution and

102. Vassallo, 1890, 193.

103. Ibid. 93.

104. The facts as recounted by Vassallo were a) "*Che Nicolo Acciaiuoli fu creato Conte ereditario di Malta e Gozo da Luigi e Giovanna nel 1357. (b) che egli ottenne, che questo titolo di conte di Malta divenisse omai l'appannaggio del figlio primogenito, in Conte d'Amalfi di sua famiglia. (c) Che questo titolo fu effettivamente portato a Angelo, suo figlio primogenito, in vivenza del padre. (d) Che Roberto, primogenito d'Angelo, porto anche a sua volta questo titolo. (e) Che non fu se non dopo la morte di Roberto (senza eredi) che il titolo di Malta cessò essere portato dagli Acciaiuoli.*" Vassallo continues to affirm that the Acciaiuoli family remained in the possession of the County of Malta up to 1372, when due to the peace accord between Naples and Ferdinand III of Sicily, Naples "*non continuarono a conferire la signoria di Malta*" and it was returned to Frederick III of Sicily. Vassallo, 1890, 94.

105. Ibid.

106. Vassallo, 1854, 158.



requirements, but without furnishing dates.<sup>107</sup> He also discusses the privileges enjoyed by the Islands from the new monarchs of Aragon and their confirmation besides the achievements and notoriousness of some of the most noble families of the Island, as the Inguanez family, the expulsion of the Jews in 1492.<sup>108</sup> On Malta's relations with Sicily for economic and political reasons, Vassallo comments that *i nostri non potessero staccarsi dale ubertose mamme della Sicilia*.<sup>109</sup> Such interest in economic questions would push Vassallo into the adjacent field of social history and this is where he makes the first reference in his book to the daily life of the Maltese. Quoting Abela, he says that the years 1427-28 were years of great misery, followed by plague, which he described as misery's faithful follower, but *non ne abbiamo dettagli, e meglio*.<sup>110</sup>

The building of some of the old churches was also a subject for discussion in Vassallo's work. He discussed the formation of the parishes, which he said numbered eight, but he mentions only three: Żejtun, Birkirkara and Qormi besides Notabile and Borgo, while the others are referred to by "ecc..."<sup>111</sup> Probably this information was taken from De Mello's list. In an appendix in the end of Chapter 12, Vassallo discussed the rebuilding of the church of Qormi, Żurrieq and Żejtun. He said that according to an inscription in Latin, written in "beautiful Gothic characters"<sup>112</sup> and found in the sacristy of the parish church, and reproduced in his book, the church of Qormi was rebuilt in 1451. However, the date of the inscription is in Latin characters and not written in indiction. This could mean that it was done in later centuries. About the church of Żurrieq, Vassallo says that it was also reconstructed in the middle of the fifteenth century but he gave no sources. The most reliable seems to be the church of San Gregorio in Żejtun, because the date given in the dome is in the indiction as well as in Latin characters, *Indict X MCCCCLXXXII ultimo Februari*. The date about the rebuilding of Qormi church 1451 and the enlargement or rebuilding of the church at Żurrieq and Żejtun i.e. 1448 and 1492 respectively are accepted by Mario Buhagiar,<sup>113</sup> who further says that the three inscriptions were recorded by Abela.<sup>114</sup>

### The Hospitallers' History

The third part, 'Epoca Recente', examines the changes experienced by the Maltese islands with the arrival of the Knights. This section can be divided into three parts; the first covers the history of the origins of the Order up to the Siege of Malta of 1565. The

107. Ibid. 155.

108. Ibid. 236.

109. Ibid. 151.

110. Ibid. 152.

111. Ibid. 156.

112. M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Churches in Malta', *Medieval Malta Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed A.T. Luttrell, (London, 1976), 174.

113. Ibid.

114. Abela, 364-365, 369.

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**NOBILIA TAZ-ZINIEN**

**F'ILSIEN MALTI**

TA

**DR. GIO. ANT. VASSALLO**

*Manuscript  
Preserved in  
the Library of the  
Royal Academy of Sciences  
of the University of Palermo*



**MALTA**  
**STAMPA MUSEO**  
**1848**

second part covers the Hospitaller and Malta's history through the rule of each and every Grandmaster. The third part is a tour de force of the capitulation of Malta to the French, the Maltese uprising against the latter and the takeover of Malta by Britain. This third section is to be noted for its clarity and breadth, where each part is of the same length and how the author finds his way around difficult and sometimes controversial topics while remaining judicious and non-polemical. Moreover, he showed capacity to reach genuine new insights, in particular when discussing the Knights' capitulation and the succeeding French blockade.

The assessment of Maltese nationalism is given great importance in the third and last section of his book. For Vassallo, nationalism was more than an ideological movement. It was also a form of public culture. Vassallo wishes to teach the intended audience of the book – the elite – that the common people are also fully participants in this movement and not simply, to use the words of Anthony D. Smith, a type of 'lateral ethnic community', as the educated had the tendency to view the uneducated masses. This is why in this third part he is not at all oblivious of the life of the common citizens. Unlike the situation for the Middle Ages, the existence of extensive historical documentation on this period permitted more in-depth social reflections.

Therefore, Vassallo was seeking first of all to show the reader that Malta, not only had a history but also a legislative story, with its own history of law that qualified the Maltese islands as a separate European nation. His legal training is borne out by his consistent interest in the history of Hospitaller legislation.<sup>115</sup> The emanation of laws represented, to his mind, the roots of civilisation, a civilisation that was to be built on justice and equality in front of the law. In Malta, he followed a legal tradition which notes its origins to some eighteenth century enlightened scholars, who following, Pietro Giannone's criticism on the use of sadistic punishments found the complacency between law and torture as an unacceptable alliance. Like Giannone, Vassallo considered man-made suffering, the antithesis of law. In the words of Elaine Scarry, pain and suffering are dominated by inexpressibility. Not only is physical pain difficult to describe in words, Scarry insisted, but they also defeated language, with the consequence that the sufferers leave behind them few historical traces.<sup>116</sup> Vassallo enters into the political repercussions of the collective suffering of the Maltese nation, dwelling on the raid made by the Barbary corsairs on Mosta in 1526,<sup>117</sup> the razzia of 1551, or the Great Siege of 1565, but is also ready to chastise the Christian side, for inflicting indescribable pain, as was the case of the victory of Tunis where *sventuratamente i cristiani disonoravano la loro conquista con eccessi spaventevoli*.<sup>118</sup> He continues to assert that *non è mai*

115. Vassallo, 1890, 301.

116. E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (Oxford University Press, 1985).

117. Vassallo, 1890, 305.

118. *Ibid.* 311.

*nostra intenzione di applaudire alla miserabile strage.*<sup>119</sup> Michel Foucault rightly notices that European perspectives on public punishment began to slowly change in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>120</sup> Vassallo reflects this change of mentality. In accordance with the views expressed regarding excessive barbarity, he pitied the miserable destiny reserved to the captured renegades; *morte, irremissibilmente la pena de' rinnegati ed era fortuna l'averla netta, cioè senza qualche condimento dei molti che sapeva escogitare la barbarie dei tempi.*<sup>121</sup> The same feeling was expressed by Vassallo in connection with the court procedures initiated against Knight Marshal Valier and Fuster for the loss of Tripoli. Vassallo comments *noi confessiamo di non avere chiare conoscenze sulla procedura criminale spesso arbitraria d'allora*.<sup>122</sup> Sometimes, Vassallo gave significant vent to emotion in particular when he recounted stories that he could use to express the general sentiment of the people, to the extent of forgetting his previous commitments on judicial rationality. Within this context, he accepted specific popular outbreaks and arbitrary executions as legally justifiable. The unearthing of the conspiracy of the slaves of 1749 is a case in point. It resulted in the crowds attacking the house of the Baxia and the mosque. Vassallo justifies this action and considers it a means for the masses to vent out anger *col dare il crollo alla moschea ed ammazza i non pochi cani che avean nome bascià.*<sup>123</sup>

### The Moral Order

The trajectory chosen for chronicling Hospitaller history can be divided into two parts. The first concerns early Hospitaller rule, up to the time of the siege in which Vassallo has a general tendency to depict the hospitaller Grandmasters in a very good light and also takes a defensive stand towards the Order. He disagrees with Gio Antonio Ciantar over the alleged delay performed by Grandmaster L'Isle Adam in reaching Malta in 1530. Ciantar considers this act as a diplomatic move by the Grandmaster to show that he was superior to the local notables. Malta was officially bestowed to the Knights on the 23 March 1530. The Hospitaller Knights signed a month later on the 25 April but the Grand Master only reached Malta on 26 October 1530. In the meantime, a representative of the Grandmaster was sent to Malta in June. Ciantar considered this as a delaying tactic on the part of Grandmaster. He explained that if L'Isle Adam had to arrive earlier, it would have been understood that the latter was accepting to subject himself (the word used is *sottomettersi*) to the local rulers. Vassallo held a different opinion. He considers that this act was an opportune diplomatic move aimed at signalling respect towards the

119. *Ibid.*

120. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, (Gallimard, 1975).

121. Vassallo, 1890, 315.

122. *Ibid.* 360-1.

123. *Ibid.* 587.

Emperor, who had bestowed Malta to the Order.<sup>124</sup> A similar stand of defence was taken in favour of Grandmaster Jean La Valette for his heroic performance during the siege. Vassallo overlooked the other side of La Valette's character, that of a despotic ruler. He wanted the Grandmaster to enter history for the courage shown in defending Malta's European and Christian heritage from an infidel invasion. Vassallo finds even words to excuse the Grandmaster's autocratic behaviour, in particular against the Maltese native Giuseppi Callus, whom Vassallo never mentioned by name but only commented that; *ci dolse l'animo all'aver dovuto menzionare alcuni abusi di potere commessi dal Valletta prima del assedio, prima di aver egli conosciuto di che sarebbe stato capace il popolo.*<sup>125</sup> In fact, he did not enter into any detail or remote information what these abuses were all about.

The quest for a national soul immediately re-emerges in his sharp comments regarding the life of the Maltese under the Hospitallers' rule. Vassallo practically passes negative remarks on each and every Grandmaster who ruled over Malta. The author seems intent on undoing the general tendency current in Malta at the time, which sought to glorify if not mystify the Hospitaller period of Maltese history. Therefore, the first four years of L'Isle Adam's rule carry the brunt of his criticism and the Grandmaster was condemned for depriving Malta of its medieval rights which were up to then enjoyed by the population. According to Vassallo, L'Isle Adam had no interest in safeguarding the old privileges and municipal rights enjoyed by the Maltese, to the extent that some were even violated.<sup>126</sup> The legal rights of the Maltese were at the heart of Vassallo's arguments to the extent that he levels his criticism even towards Giacomo Bosio and the other official historians of the Order for their silence regarding the *contese che i giurati ebbero col Granmaestro a cagione delle contribuzioni straordinarie alle quali furono costretti di assogettarsi il misero popolo, onde pagare le spese di quell' assoldamento.* The same reproach was addressed towards Homedes's rule for the big defeats of 1551, and Del Ponte was censured for his pomposity and made-up honesty hidden behind the words of 'non sum dignus' when he had all absolute power in his hands.<sup>127</sup>

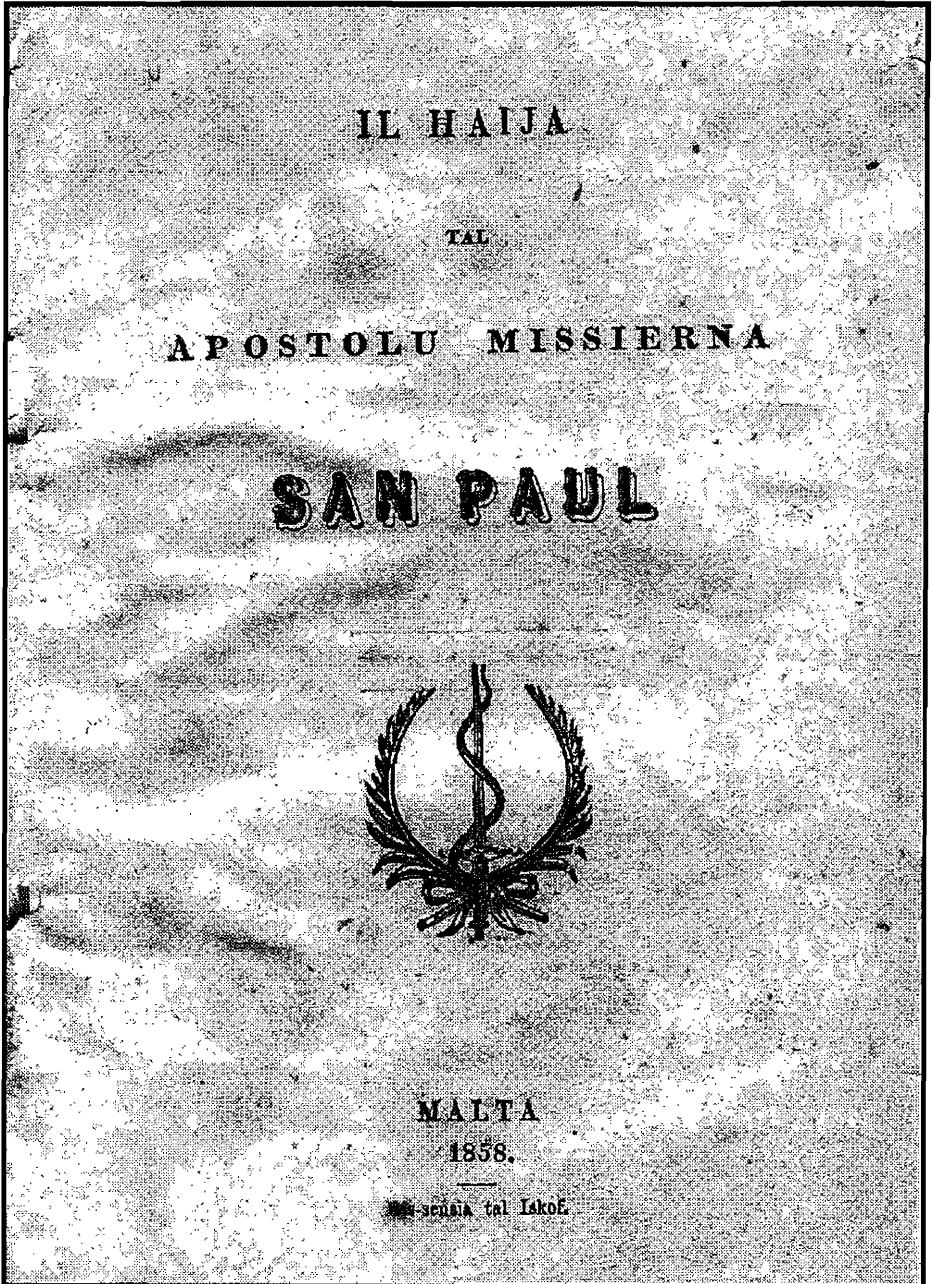
The history of Malta and that of the Order between the death of La Cassiere and the last Grandmaster Hompesch is under-represented in Vassallo's story. Two-hundred and forty-two years of history take the same length of the first thirty-five years of the Order's rule or the last fifteenth years of his history of Malta. He gives an overview of the main events which occurred during the reign of each and every Grand Master who governed Malta during this period but without entering into any detail. However, it is in these chapters that Vassallo most conspicuously loses the reverence reserved for two of the early Grandmasters, L'Isle Adam and La Valette, to become instead markedly critical of

124. Ibid. 290.

125. Ibid. 496.

126. Ibid. 301.

127. Ibid. 309.



IL HAIJA

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MALTA

1858.

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the Hospitaller rule over Malta. Such criticism reaches its apex in the analysis of the local social history. In fact, in these chapters, Vassallo gives glimpses of social life in Malta but succinctly pictures daily life as it transpires from the published censuses or from published works written by contemporaries as in the book of Ciantar, which he quoted.

Negative comments conclude the etiology in the historical narrative concerning Grandmasters La Cassiere, Verdala, De Paule and Ximenes among others. The text on Grandmaster La Cassiere is very perplexing and expresses Vassallo's ambivalence over the moral values that he so much valued and the realpolitik which he acknowledges that each leader should possess for successful government. Unfortunately, la Cassiere lacked the latter acumen *non avesse mai saputo chiudere un'occhio dove politica prudenza consigliasse a chiudere due. La Cassiere bramò trasportare al suo tempo del beato Gherardo; anacronismo fatale.*<sup>128</sup> The criticism levelled at subsequent Grandmasters is even more trenchant. He casts doubts on Verdala's suitability to becoming cardinal.<sup>129</sup> Grand Master De Paule was not held as a good model for honesty or "sexual" restraint.<sup>130</sup> Nicola Cottoner's artistic tastes, in particular the sculpture ordered for Saint John's Church, parading his coat-of-arms, was a proof in itself of his vanity, and cheekily asked if such vanity was not worse than that of a woman?<sup>131</sup> Carafa's reign was also considered tragic for Malta, in particular his rule was a blow to the nationalistic spirit. He acknowledges that certain Maltese liked Carafa's way of government, but for Vassallo his reign was tragic, as he had ordered the removal of marble covers from ancient monuments to decorate the Italian Auberge. He considered such an action as a proof of the Knights' constant revulsion towards Malta's cultural artefacts, in particular if they dated to a time prior to their arrival in Malta.<sup>132</sup> The phase of bad governments continued under the magistracy of Despuig, who was governed rather than governed,<sup>133</sup> the despotic rule of Grandmaster Pinto, which only increased the general sense of discontent among the people,<sup>134</sup> and the *Governo tristissimo* of Grandmaster Ximenes de Texada.<sup>135</sup>

The defence of the national character strongly re-emerged in the quick overviews that Vassallo made of the social situation in Malta under the knights. The first instance where Vassallo expressed his sense of national pride in a manner counter to the pretensions

128. Ibid. 512–513.

129. Ibid. 528. Vassallo also affirms that *L'ultimo anno del Verdala passò tra liti e divisioni del Convento. Egli fu accusato a S. Santità di male pratiche nei consigli, d'ingustizia nel conferire dignità e cariche; fu intaccato nell'onore riguardo a privata condotta.* Ibid. 536.

130. *non modello d'onestà nè di continenza.* Ibid. 550.

131. *non sono esse prove di vanità peggio che femminile?* Ibid. 573.

132. *che i Maltesi ebbero avuto costali spogliamenti come prova dell'odio costante de' cavalieri, usi sempre a distruggere tutto quanto attestava le illustrazioni dell'isola prima d'esservi l'Ordine stabilito.* Ibid. 576.

133. *il quale, a quanto leggesi, anzichè governare, fu governato.* Ibid. 583.

134. Ibid. 590.

135. Ibid. 599.

and claims of the Order was with reference to the report on Malta made by the Order's commission in 1524. He disagreed with its conclusions. According to him, *l'isola a frequente però di venti mila abitanti, con una città munita di fortificazioni, fregiata col titolo di Notabile e per le gestà e valore de nativi; molte famiglie agiate senza titoli nobiliari; un' antica rinomata chiesa cattedrale, un pingue vescovato, clero secolare e regolare ufficiente in sedici vaste chiese; un' ospedale a larghi proventi, un foro a piene competenze, i diversi menzionati ed altri ufficii pubblici, una milizia nazionale, un castello presidiato da truppe regie, un' altro a difesa del porto, altre opere, sebben piccole, di difesa in altre parti dell'isola; un borgo marittimo frequentatissimo pel commercio, un considerevole numero di navigli su cui sventolava il glorioso stendardo del Conte Ruggiero; questi fregi, commodi, istituzioni, notabilità, ed altro che riguardava il materiale civile di Malta.*<sup>136</sup> All this, according to Vassallo, demonstrated that the Islands were not as the commissioners depicted them to l'Isle Adam and Pope Clement VII: poor, with St. Angelo partly in ruins. According to Vassallo, the commissioners depicted Malta in such a bad state so that Malta would be given by the Emperor *franca d'ogni peso*...<sup>137</sup> Further, *le recenti memorie infine della deliziosa Rodi, fecero si che i visitatori mal potessero dare una relazione di Malta con tutta purità di coscienza.*<sup>138</sup>

Vassallo explained the population increase, despite the frequent raids and pestilence that afflicted the country, as a sign of prosperity and as the result of foreigners settling in Malta. Further, there is evidence to show that some Maltese were engaged in corsairing and in the transhipment of merchandise to and from Sicily. This implies that Malta had owners of ships. For truth sake, the number of owned vessels seems to have been small, while no difference was made between corsairing and merchant galleys. The fortifications could not resist a long siege. The Order's commissioners criticised Malta from the military side as unfavourable because it lacked good fortifications and Fort St. Angelo could not resist an attack by cannons from Sceberras Hill. The island also lacked water and depended on Sicily for its daily food subsistence. However, Vassallo's allegations, even if they are overstated, contain elements of truth, as Blouet points out: "Generally speaking, life in medieval Malta was richer and more vigorous than the chroniclers sponsored by the Order in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would have us believe... the Island had a capacity to recover from setbacks. The rise in population numbers at the end of the century tends to suggest growing prosperity."<sup>139</sup>

The next instance in which he expressed strong concern for the plight of the Maltese is for the years 1550 and 1552. The quest for a Maltese nationhood were threatened by an infidel invader and an insensitive foreign master. In November 1550, Malta was hit by one of the harshest starvation periods of its history, an episode which is rarely

136. Vassallo, 1854, 271.

137. Ibid. 258.

138. Ibid. 259.

139. B. Blouet, *Story of Malta*, (Malta, 1984), 45.



mentioned in contemporary books on our history. Yet according to sixteenth-century chroniclers, in turn reported by Vassallo, famine was so great that all newly-borns passed away.<sup>140</sup> The following year reserved a great tragedy for the island, culminating in the raid on Malta and Gozo by the Ottoman Admiral Sinan Pasha and supported by the North African corsair Dragut Rais. The raid proceeded with the taking into captivity of most of the inhabitants of Gozo and compounded by the loss of Tripoli; events which have *coperto l'Ordine di vergogna*.<sup>141</sup> The shadow of defeat continued to loom over the Order for another year, making Vassallo obliged to defend the memory of the Maltese who died on the attack on Zuara in Tunis. It had to be an attack which had been intended by the Knights to redeem their name from dishonour and had to eventually lead to the recapture of Tripoli. However, Joseph F. Grima rightly concludes that '*the whole mission ended up miserably*'.<sup>142</sup> Vassallo castigated the mainstream review of the Grandmaster Homedes' action as reported by Bosio. Bosio wrote that, on receiving the news of the defeat, the Grandmaster recommended the souls of the innocent knights to God<sup>143</sup>, but forgetting, Vassallo insisted, to make the same offering to the Maltese and Italian soldiers who had died for the same cause.<sup>144</sup>

The defence of the national spirit of the Maltese continues in an indirect criticism of Giacomo Bosio for not highlighting sufficiently the courage of the Maltese during the siege of 1565, and more importantly for diminishing the contribution of the Maltese both to the siege effort but also for not mentioning the stand taken by the Maltese not to have the new city of Valletta subjected to the *odiosa segregazione* of the collachio system,<sup>145</sup> which would have meant, that as in Birgu, the Knights would have had their exquisite quarters, in which no Maltese would have been permitted to live or enter. Perhaps, the reflection made by Vassallo with regard to the employment of Maltese soldiers by the knights to guard the Grandmaster, encapsulated his utopic vision of what should have been the respect of the Knights towards the Maltese inhabitants. After the revolt of the slaves in 1749, the Grandmaster took the decision to employ Maltese to guard his palace. Foreign mercenaries began to be considered too risky, as their loyalty was judged doubtful. Vassallo reflected that the Maltese always merited *riguardi e preferenze che talvolta non seppe quel governo loro accordare*.<sup>146</sup>

140. Vassallo, 1890, 325: *che quasi tutti li bambini che allattavano, per il patimento delle madri morirono.*

141. *Ibid.* 328.

142. J. F. Grima, *Żmien il-Kavallieri f' Malta 1530-1798*, (Malta, 2001), 25.

143. G. Bosio, *Dell' Istoria della Sacra et Illustrissima Religione di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, (Napoli, 1684), Vol. 3, 332.

144. Vassallo, 1890, 368.

145. *Ibid.* 500.

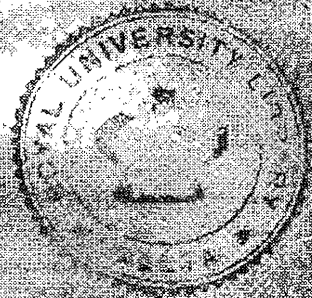
146. *Ibid.* 588.

# IRRELIET U CIATT

BIL MALTI

TA

DR. GIO. ANTONIO VASSALLO.



MALTA

*Tipografia Industriale*

DI

GIOV. MUSCAT

48, Piazza Mercanti—Valletta.

1895.

### The French Revolution

The Enlightenment and the resulting French Revolution are considered as the genesis of the nationalism in Europe. Nationalism erupted as a counter reaction to expansionist policies of the new French Republic. It is within this spirit that Vassallo reacted negatively to the French occupation of Malta. It was an occupation that went against the national interest of Malta. The French appeared to his eyes as another force of occupation. He recognised some of the benefits affected in the judicial system of Malta, but their short period of government ignored the suffering of the masses. Vassallo confessed that he had external pressure by some individuals, whom he failed to mention, not to indulge in this history. However, he held his own opinion of what constituted history and considered the period from the death of Grandmaster Rohan until September 1800 extremely interesting,<sup>147</sup> to the extent that it ended up making part of his story.

Vassallo was well aware that he was writing about a period about which some of the protagonists or at least their descendants were still alive and perhaps formed part of his readership. However, he was not afraid to speak out his mind about these events and furnishes information which is missing from previous writings about the French occupation of Malta, supported by his sarcastic comments on the French Revolution symbols in use during this period. Vassallo refers to the French decision to eliminate as a sign of "liberty" all the emblems of the Order, including those on paintings as *frammenti d'un inno al genio della follia*,<sup>148</sup> whilst the French emblem of the revolution, the trepicot and the cockade, which were the new symbol of white collar elitism were defined as *un vero carnevale di stato*.<sup>149</sup> At the same time, Vassallo defended the Maltese uprising and disagreed with the idea that the revolt against the French was only the result of the Maltese spontaneous reaction against the ill-treatment of the Church. He lists various other reasons, including the general discontentment in Malta of the French rule and poor economic performance, and thefts and pilfering performed by the French soldiers, among other reasons.<sup>150</sup> The latter actions were qualified by Vassallo as acts of vagabondage. The people's suffering are again taken into consideration by Vassallo, who discussed diseases afflicting Malta during these difficult times, including those suffered by the besieged inhabitants of the cities as well as those of the villages.<sup>151</sup> This sense of great preoccupation with Maltese suffering resurfaced in the critical review of Ransijat's works on the siege and his supposed compassion for the Maltese, which Vassallo rightly questions.<sup>152</sup> Being an ex-knight of the Order and one of the appointed French commissioners to govern Malta, Ransijat's text was suspiciously looked at by Vassallo.

147. Ibid. 614.

148. Ibid. 638.

149. Ibid. 637.

150. Ibid. 641.

151. Ibid. 680.

152. Ibid. 670.

It was more than biased in favour of the French. He also lamented that in the conspiracy organised by Dun Mikiel Xerri and Guglielmo Lorenzi, none of the conspirators were of noble birth. Vassallo seemed to have been strongly touched by this fact, that the supposedly self-acclaimed leaders of the people did not stand to be counted at the moment of need.<sup>153</sup> At the same time, he found no difficulty in unmasking Francesco Saverio Caruana's aspiration for the bishopric of Malta, which in Vassallo's opinion was the driving force that had pushed Caruana to join the French forces first and the British later.<sup>154</sup>

The tonality of the story changes with the arrival of the British. The author, perhaps understandably – he is also the product of his times – took an apologetic and triumphal outlook towards the British arrival in Malta. In this sense, he even took a personal stand against the idea or the benefit of having the Hospitallers returning to Malta as was stipulated in the Amiens Treaty. Vassallo spoke in terms of the Maltese being against the return of the Order and in favour of the British. In reality, this is one of the few instances where Vassallo understood the word Maltese to mean the local notables instead of the masses of the people.

### **Storia ta Malta**

Perhaps, certain stands and comments passed in the book *Storia di Malta* aroused many eyebrows to the extent of creating social aversion towards the author. On a biographical note, Vassallo had passed through very difficult times. He died young at the age of 51 after suffering from a severe depression. While such a physical state cannot be associated in any way with the reception of his work *Storia di Malta*, his next book on Maltese history undertakes a divulgate turn.

Some doubts may arise about the book *Storia ta Malta*'s authenticity. It bears the name of Gan Anton Vassallo. It is written in a simplistic way and is shorter than the *Storia di Malta*. Some statements that the author makes in the *Storia ta' Malta* contradict the advice Vassallo gives in the preface of the *Storia di Malta*, that history should be written in a scientific way.

Tradition in the book *Storia ta Malta* is more strongly emphasised. In the Maltese version one finds the use of traditions which are not included in the Italian edition, such as those concerning St. Paul's stay on the Island. Vassallo says that while St. Paul was in Malta, he preached from where today there is the saint's statue, at Rabat and that Publius's father was miraculously cured by St. Paul at the place where there stands today the altar dedicated to St. Publius in the Cathedral and that the Cathedral itself was constructed on the same site where the palace of Publius stood. With regard to the arrival of Count Roger,

153. Ibid. 657.

154. Ibid. 662.

he repeats the legends of *Migra l-Ferħa*, of *Wied ir-Rum* and of *Għajn Klieb*, whilst the episode of Roger donating the national colours to the Maltese is flamboyantly recounted.<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, in the Maltese edition, there are also ideas, already expressed in the *Storia di Malta*, for instance the fact that Procopius makes no indirect reference to Malta being under the Goths or Vandals.<sup>156</sup> However, with the case of religion he would take risks with regard to authentication. He believed that the Saracens prohibited the Christians to practise their religion. As in the case of Italian tradition, Vassallo does not mean that Christianity disappeared from the Islands, but that Christianity went underground.

An impression that could mislead one into thinking that Vassallo is not the author, or not the sole author, is the fact that the preface is written in the first person plural.<sup>157</sup> This literary genre was in use in the romance languages during the period, forming that genre of speech known as 'pluralis majestatis'.<sup>158</sup> There are other indications which support the claim that the book *Storia ta' Malta* was written by Vassallo. Two persons that knew Vassallo personally, his pupil Paolo Cesareo and his friend Achille Ferris, in their biographical text about Vassallo, both published in 1868, attributed *Storia ta' Malta* to the latter. Moreover, Ferris in a description of Vassallo's book *Hrejjeġ u Cait* (1863) published in the newspaper *L'Ordine* in 1863, gave a list of Vassallo's Maltese publications and among these he included *Storia ta Malta*. His comment about it was that it is an *opera interessantissima e che nessun'altro seppe sopperire sulla sua mancanza. Il popolo è ora che gusta a leggere con piacere nella propria lingua la sua storia – storia assai cospicua per le varie vicende, cui andò soggetta*.<sup>159</sup> Ferris mentioned the point of Vassallo's aim to write in the vernacular: *il Dr. Vassallo crede ancora necessario di pubblicare un'altra in maltese pel popolo il quale accolse con vivo interesse la storia del proprio paese*.<sup>160</sup> Vassallo himself held the idea that the writings for the *vulgus* has to be accessible.<sup>161</sup>

Further, Ferris mentions the fact that Vassallo used the orthography of the Società Filologica Maltese, of which Vassallo was a member.<sup>162</sup> Vassallo himself, in the preface for the book *Mogħdia taż-Żmien F'İlsien Malti* (1843), specifically says that *l'alfabetto che adottato per ora e quello già usato da alcuni de' nostri, non essendo ancora pronti i tipi per quello stabbilito dall'Accademia Filologica Maltese, cui appartengo come socio,*

155. Vassallo, 1862, 38.

156. Ibid, 27.

157. Ibid, 3-4.

158. M. Fsadni, *Il-Migja u L-Hidma ta' L-Ewwel Dumnikani f' Malta (1450-1512)*, (Malta, 1965), 2.

159. *L'Ordine*, 14 Agosto 1863, 4.

160. Ferris, 1868, 24.

161. In a letter addressed to Prof. Dr. Stefano Zerafa, Vassallo wrote that: *Sii facile al popolo, quanto mai si possa: imperò esso è impaziente, ritroso, nè in riguardo a educazione qualunque è trattabile che a carezze. Parlando al popolo, bene va essa ogni eleganza sacrificata alla generale intelligenza*. Ibid. 10.

162. G. A. Vassallo, *Mogħdia taż-Żmien f'İlsien Malti*, (Malta, 1848), 5.

*ma la differenza n'e' pochissima.*<sup>163</sup> The alphabet of the Societa Filologica, published in 1848, was all composed in Italian characters.<sup>164</sup> The orthography used by Vassallo in the books *Gesu Kristu fid-Dinja*, (1861) *Il-Hajja ta' L-Appostlu Missierna San Pawl*, (1858) and *Storia ta' Malta* (1862) seem to be all in the alphabet of the Societa Filologica, as in fact Ferris claims.

The Maltese version follows the format of the Italian one. It is divided, as the *Storia di Malta*, into three historical epochs. The first part comprises the Phoenician period i.e. 1400 B.C. up to the arrival of the Arabs in Malta in 870. The "Epoca Media" stretches from the rise of Islam up to the arrival of the Order of St. John in 1530 A.D. The third section which Vassallo refers to as "l-Aħħar Żmien", comprises the period from 1530 to 1813.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to place Vassallo's book *Storia di Malta* in its historical context and discuss the issues it raises. It was not the aim of this paper to judge Vassallo's works on the basis of theories that are far beyond his times. The Romantic school of thought, with its empiricist vision, used interpretative tools which, while still remaining at the basis of the writing of history, are far removed from those applied by the Annales school, or closer to our times, the new methods of psychoanalytical history. Judging with the established methodologies of history and historiography used during Vassallo's time, he wrote a clear, balanced and judicious book that surveys the past historical events together with the principal debates. Dense though it is, the text is never boring. It is a work of appropriate historical erudition, both in tone and research, but also possesses 'freshness' and some genuinely new insights. The book would become the precursor for the 'romantic' approach in the writing of the Maltese history. He set up a model that was to be copied and repeated until recently. The book is free from gratuitous or incorrect far-fetched speculation and at the same time slides from weightiness towards populism in a well-managed, seamless and impressive way. Furthermore, his yearning to reach border readers appears to have pushed him to write a popular version of his story, in the vernacular, that was the sole language which the masses could understand. He held no room for bourgeois fake assertions. The use of Italian was not derived by any sense of class distinctiveness but only from the fact that it was Malta's recognised academic and international language.

Vassallo's plan to publish a revised edition of his work *Storia di Malta*<sup>165</sup> could indicate that he himself was conscious of some shortcomings encountered in his chronicle.

163. G. A. Vassallo, *Il-Kari Malti mictub mil Accademia Filologica Maltia*, Accademia Filologica, (Malta, 1843).

164. Ibid.

165. Ferris, 1868, p.14. *Il detto autore intendeva di pubblicare una seconda edizione migliorata accresciuta. Ora supplisca in sua qualche altro letterato nostrale.*

However, Vassallo's book, when seen in the perspective of its time and the serious way in which it was undertaken, was an achievement and a step forward for Maltese historiography. More importantly, the story of Malta in the Maltese language was written for the "common reader". This explains its processual perspective which is simple and lacking in competing paradigms. This lack of sophistication made the book an ideal nineteenth century tool for the teaching of history and explains why it was taken as a model for the writing of history in Maltese by latter historians. In post-modernist terms, Vassallo was relevant to his times, not only for the writing of history, and this was irrelevant of the language medium he used, but more importantly for standing up to the challenge offered by his times and using history for a national cause.

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## *Biographical Note*

Simon Mercieca currently occupies the post of Director of the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta. He is a researcher on Historical Demography within the History Department and lectures on historical demographic subjects at the same University. He is coordinator of the Contemporary Mediterranean Study course and Mediterranean Studies in the Faculty of Arts in the University of Malta and also President of the Koperattiva Kulturali Universitarja (KKU) (University Cultural Cooperative Association) that provides cultural services on Campus and elsewhere. Amongst these activities are exhibitions, theatre, opera, music, books, radio, television and multimedia productions. Dr. Mercieca is also the Malta expert on the Framework Programme 6 (FP6) for culture and society (Priority 7). In 1990 he graduated B.A. in History and Maltese and a year later he obtained his B.A. (Hons.) degree in History. He furthered his studies in History at a Master's level. During this period of study, he was awarded a scholarship by the *Istituto di Cultura Italiana* to study at the University of Rome *La Sapienza*. After finalising his Master's degree, he was awarded another scholarship to study historical demography at the University of Paris - Sorbonne. In 1995 he completed the *Diplôme d'Etude Approfondi* obtaining the highest marks. In 1998 he was invited by the University of the European Union at Florence to follow courses in Historical Demography. In 2002, Mr. Mercieca defended his thesis at the University of Paris – Sorbonne, entitled *Community Life in the Central Mediterranean A Socio-Demographic Study of the Maltese Harbour Towns, Bormla 1586-1815*, where he obtained his doctorate *cum laude*. During his academic studies, Dr Mercieca was invited to attend seminars and conferences in Greece, Israel, Morocco, Paris, Malta, Florence, Valencia, Tunis, Cagliari, Egypt, Pisa, Algiers, Cartagena, Venice, Perugia, Brussels, Lorca and Villefrance-sur-mer. He has also published a number of academic papers both in local and international journals.

