

IN SEARCH OF GOZO'S ANCIENT TOWN: WRITTEN AND NON-WRITTEN SOURCES

Pawlu Mizzi

The controversy over the origin of Gozo's main town has been the subject of much research during the past years. There is general agreement that it originated from an inland settlement in central Gozo during the Bronze Age. However, two sites are quoted for its location: one, as being that on a flat-topped small hill, the other on a humped meadow just beneath it. The former is claimed to have been a Greek *acropolis* (Bres 1814), the latter, the site of the old Roman *oppidum*.

Another suggestion which, in my opinion, contains a sort of a compromise between these two theories (Bonanno 1990) contends the existence of an upper city and a lower city. This latter suggestion is almost identical to an older one by Can. Gian Piet Francesco Agius de Soldanis in his *Il Gozo Antico-Moderno e Sacro-Profano*, some two hundred years earlier.

Those who are acquainted with historical publications on Gozo and have read Agius de Soldanis, will agree that *Il Gozo Antico e Moderno*, which may be said to be a compendium of places, churches, events, persons, and all that made Gozo since the Deluge, has since served as a primary source material to those writing about their home-town. Many, in fact, – not excluding, of course, those writing about the main town of Victoria – refer to Agius de Soldanis as “the father of Gozitan historiography”. Some still look at him as a model, almost an idol, whose glorification of Gozo has become synonymous with patriotism.

The excessive exaltation of Gozo has naturally given rise to anomalies and anachronisms. Sometimes whole passages or episodes were invented to glorify Gozo, a device not unusual with biased writers. Abela, for instance, invented a Maltese medieval period to give a picture of a Catholic Malta; Valentini created a royal visit by Frederick IV to set up

a Maltese link for an Italian heritage; and the Jesuit Gerolamo Manduca literally fabricated Pauline traditions to give a sound base for an alleged Apostolic origin of Christianity in Malta. It is thus no wonder that even in Gozo today, some writers appear to be much more arduous in their use of imagination than in their research in the history of their island.

I propose three main considerations in my search for this ancient town. The first regards the antiquity of the site as an urban centre; the second regards the cultural development effecting its social and economic activities; the third regards the physical size of the site and its exact geographical location.

Documented Sources

In 1960 Dr Trump, then Director of the Museum of Antiquities, supervised the digging of a sewer trench at It-Tokk in Victoria. The trench went down 3.70 meters deep touching the surface of the clay strata. At the lowest end it revealed shreds of the Borg in-Nadur phase, over which lay a thin level of Punic remains. The trench was a real mine of information for those willing to make use of unwritten sources. In the midst of Roman remains there was at least one cellar with empty wine jars and a building littered with fifth-century oil-lamps, of which one had Christian markings. The rest in the upper strata consisted of deposits of rubbish belonging to various ages from the Mediaeval to the modern, much of which disturbed because of more recent development. The condition of the deposits made it abundantly clear that human activity was never absent from the Bronze Age to modern times. Trenches also excavated in various localities within the walls of the *Castello* did not yield anything prior to the late medieval times. A report of the findings at It-Tokk and the *Castello* was published in the *Annual Museum Report*. Besides, all prehistoric antiquities found on site at It-Tokk and elsewhere in Gozo were catalogued and indexed (Evans 1971).

This stratification confirms that the general social and political structure of Gozo's past was identical to that in Malta. It will be, thus, helpful before going through further considerations, to review the various phases in the general framework of Gozo's history.

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

The Prehistoric Period

Gozo had a long prehistoric period identical in its eras and phases to that in Malta. According to Renfrew (1975) a lot of what has been written about prehistory is inadequate and needs to be revalued in the light of 'the New Archaeology' from the United States. Measured with the anthropologist's new time-yardstick, the impressive temples at Ġgantija became a milestone in human activity, the first stone temples in the world (Renfrew 1975). They are the product of a highly organized society, built by 'a chiefdom society', with a complicated hierarchical system consisting of minor village chiefdoms and sub-chiefdoms under the leadership of one head-chief. Members of minor chiefdoms lived scattered in habitations in various regions away from the temples. None, however, seem to have built their huts on hilltops. They preferred the lowlands, places like L-Imrejzbiet in Ghajnsielem, and Taċ-Ċawla, on the outskirts of Rabat (Veen and Van der Bloom 1991).

Long before civilization dawned on Gozo, man had already long settled in and about It-Tokk. Trump is of the opinion that 'about the middle of the [second] millenium the scattered open settlements were largely abandoned in favour of defensible sites on many of the flat-topped hills of the two islands of Malta and Gozo'. As in Sicily these had 'bell-shaped cisterns and silos'. However, Trump (1972) asserts that 'in Malta [proto-urbanism] did not develop further'. Settlers preferred sites which were closer to arable lands with natural nearby streams. The abundance of pottery, coins and incised marble, as well as the foundations of dwelling huts with adjoining kilns found in the area of It-Tokk are among the primary source materials for an outline of Gozo's early urbanization.

The site today occupied by the old quarters of Rabat was in its earliest times a humped meadow bordering with a number of valleys: Wied Marsalforn beginning from Fomm il-Gir on the north, Wied ta' Żejta and Ta' Hadidu on the east, Wied Siekel up to the top of Triq tal-Ghajn on the south, and "Is-Saccaya" (Lunzjata) on the west (Bowen-Jones *et. al.* 1961). It appears that by the third century B.C. this site developed into a bustling municipal town. According to a stone tablet there were in it at least four temples needing repairs. There was also a council of administration (Heltzer 1993). This inscription should "give us a better idea about the Gozitan society" (Vella 1995) long before the Romans set foot

on the island. The urns and other funerary potterware found in Punic graves along Il-Vajringa should also add further to our knowledge of the culture of this early Punic period (Caruana 1886).

The Romans

After the arrival of the Romans in 218 B.C. the number of inscribed archaeological remains in the neighbourhood of It-Tokk increased. They included statues, coins, oil-crushers, ceramic tiles, glass jars, amphorae, anchors, oil-lamps and foundations of private homes, all within the wall that surrounded the town itself. Other Roman remains were found in Ramla, where a Roman villa was uncovered during the first decade of the twentieth century (Bonanno 1993). Literature about this Roman period has increased since Abela (1647) published the texts of some of the Latin epigraphy discovered in Rabat.

The text of Roman epigraphs found in the ancient quarters of the Roman town around the church of St George is included in the *Corpus Inscriptorum Latinorum X*. These are also quoted by Onorato Bres in his *Malta Antica Illustrata* (1816). A. A. Caruana, who explored and surveyed the area between 1881 and 1897 has also given a comprehensive report of the more important remains he found in *Ancient Pagan Tombs and Christian Cemeteries* (1898). More recent literature on the period include Coleiro (1971), Azzopardi (1992), Buhagiar (1986;1993) and Bonanno (1990).

The Byzantines

There is little documented evidence about the people or the way they lived during the rule of the Byzantines in Gozo. Except for the usual legends, told in sermons to enhance belief in miraculous protection, literature about the period is lacking. One particular story with a historical background, that of General Belisarius and his visit to the *Matrice*, is as fictitious as the rest, particularly when one considers that the General hardly had time to touch off Malta in his pursuit of the Vandals. However, one interesting non-written source is available. This is a seal bearing the name of Theophylact, an *archon* whose function was that of a civic and military administrator. It is to be presumed that Gozo had a town and was then for some time an autonomous or semi-autonomous island probably under the central authority of a *dux* in Malta (Luttrell 1979).

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

According to a contemporary geographic list in the *Descriptio Orbis Romani* attributed to George of Cyprus, Gozo was regarded as an independent town, one of fourteen under the Sicilian province of Syracuse. The interesting study by Brown (1975) on Byzantine Malta is very revealing.

The Arabs

The Arabs, who ruled the island after the Byzantines, are even as scarcely documented. Ibn Khaldun is perhaps the most important source. He lived during the twelfth century but he is the one who informed us that the Arabs came to Malta in c. 870 (Amari 1880). El Edrisi, the geographer of King Roger, tells us that Gozo was one hundred miles east of Pantelleria and had a fine harbour. Arab authors, included by Michele Amari in his *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula* (Amari and Schiarparelli 1883), are indispensable for any study of the period.

Unfortunately, Amari missed Al Himyari who records that for almost a century the islands were left almost uninhabited. The thin layer of the Arab period recorded at the It-Tokk trench almost corroborates Al Himyari. Until recently no Maltese historian seems to have been aware of Himyari's information and consequently the idea that Gozo had for many years been uninhabited has not been discussed seriously. This may not be accepted by a number of writers of ecclesiastical history. Some insist that Christianity had under no circumstance been interrupted in the Maltese islands. Mgr Luigi Vella (*Nicol Ghabdul*) assures that at least some of the Gozitans had preserved their Christian faith and that as soon as Count Roger 'liberated' them, the *Matrice* was re-opened and re-consecrated.

The complete absence of toponyms with Latin roots, however, bears different witness. Besides, the fact that the Count had to fight hard before bringing the Gozitan Muslim leaders to submission leads one to think that there were no "Greeks" on the island.

The recent publications by both Wettinger and Brincat will definitely help to understand the period better. In the meantime the scholar could rely on two most tangible sources of Gozo's dark period during the rule of the Muslims: Gozo's toponyms and Gozo's language.

Toponyms

Toponyms are indeed important historical sources in Gozo's medieval period. A look at the map of the central Mediterranean will undoubtedly help us to discover the different linguistic strata in the region. Berber, Arabic and Sicilian accretions are cemented in place-names as shreds in soil. In Gozo, thanks to its secluded geographical situation, such linguistic stratification had been preserved and is today a most valuable source for the researcher. Comparison and assimilation between toponyms in Gozo and Malta and those in neighbouring lands, like Sicily, Pantelleria, Lampedusa and Tunisia, reveal almost identical lexical and morphological structures. Place names denoting topographical descriptions, like *marσα*, *ras*, *cala*, *djebel*, *djir*, *furnu*, and *burgj* or *bradj* are common in all countries speaking Semitic languages. Naturally not without changes in their semantics (E. Serracino-Inglott 1974-83). A *burdj* (pl *bradj*) in Sicily is *borgo*, meaning town (Aquilina 1981-86). But in Gozo it retained its old meaning of 'grave'. As *Burdj el Djedid* in Tunisia. Hitti in *History of the Arabs* relates how the term underwent semantic changes from grave to tower, and eventually walled-town by the Ottoman Turks who sacked Lebanon during the fourteenth century. There are also other names as *rahl* ^ᶜ*amrūn*, *rahl al djedid*, *rahl* ^ᶜ*ammār*, *alhadjar*, *djardutah*, *aldjudran* and *almaderadj*, in travel accounts of thirteenth century Sicily by El Idrisi and Ibn Djubayr which correspond to places in Malta and Gozo.

Civitas and Oppidum

The urbanized centres in the central areas in both Malta and Gozo have since Roman times taken their name from that of the island itself. Thus that in Malta became known as *Melitae Civitas* while that in Gozo, *Gaulos oppidum*. Both *civitas* and *oppidum* are natural geographic terms, the former to denote the principal administrative centre of a district or region, the latter given to walled-towns on the periphery. Both notions were kept by subsequent rulers, but they translated the terms into their own language: as *Medina* (city) in Malta and *Il-Ḥaġar* (town) in Gozo. These, naturally, have undergone frequent changes in their semantics. Because of the structural alterations as the town developed from a Roman *oppidum* to a feudal *borgo*, and during the late Middle Ages to *subborgo*, Il-Ḥaġar became Ir-Rabat and more recently Victoria. When Wettinger's complete work on local topography is published, the histo-

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

rian may be in a better position to assess the significance and importance of the earliest toponyms as documented in ancient deeds and notarial archives.

Il-Haġar

Of primary importance in this search is the early name by which this ancient town was known. It appears that *Ir-Rabat* was at some time called *Il-Haġar*. This emerges from a curious appellative applied to a statue of St George placed on a site which was on the boundary walls of the old town *San Ġorġ tal-Haġar*. The appellatives merit serious consideration. Some philologists may translate *al-Haġar* as "of stone" but Preca (1904) defines *Il-Haġar* as *muro di recinto*. This agrees with the description of towns with names of "*Hadjar*" as given by Hitti. The oldest walled-town by this name recorded on a tablet belongs to the seventh century B.C. The ruins of Naqab Alhadjar, still extant in the Middle East, might give an idea of what a walled-town by the name "*Hadjar*" looked like. In Sicily and in Tunisia the name is not uncommon. Others, with similar connotation, have had their name translated into the language of the dominator. *Djebal* in Phoenicia was hellenized as *Byblos* and *Alhadjar* in Matera (Sicily) was latinised as *Sassi*. Ibn Giubayr, on his famous journey from Andalusia to Mecca during the thirteenth century, visited the walled-towns known as *Alhadjr*. *Alhadjar* in Berber morphology is a name of unity. It is derived from *hudjrah* which according to early documentation, is a small house (Caracausi 1983).

Ta' Haġrat is another place-name of Berber formation as *Tasanat*. *Haġrat* here is not the construct state of *haġra* having the modern meaning of "a stone" but of the old *huġra* meaning "a house". It's also logic that the toponym refers to "a house" and not to "a stone". The word *huġra* for house is still recorded in the Maltese idiom. We say for instance "*ġew il-festa b'haġarhom*" or in the plural "*bi hġarhom*" meaning "they come to the feast with their house" referring to their family and not "they come to the feast with their stones".

Ir-Rabat

Rabat, too, is another of the toponyms that has been discussed by a number of scholars. Some say it derives from Rabbath, the goddesses



A general view of development of the town of Rabat from Ta' Gelmus Hill.

(Bonnici 1975); others from the verb '*rabat*' or '*rabad*', to tie, and, consequently, Rabat is the name of the suburb in relation to the city (Bezzina 1993). Some even dare relate the name to the fact that merchants during the Middle Ages normally tied their donkeys outside the gate of the city. Rabat is also sometimes erroneously mixed with *Ribat* (Bonnici 1975). In fifteenth-century Sicilian documents Rabat was the *borgo* or *borgium* but later it is referred to as *Suburbju oy Rabatu*. Wettinger (1980) keeps this latter meaning. So does Professor Aquilina (1960) who is in turn also quoted by Caracausi (1983) as having this meaning. It is however plausible, in the absence of documented evidence, that the name Rabat was adopted for the old town by Sicilian immigrants who filled administrative posts on the island following the rise of the Catalans after the death of Martin the Elder in 1509.

One of the earliest cities to be called by this name was Rabat in Morocco (*Everybody Encyclopaedia* 1958). The term then acquired a double meaning: a port and a city. In Spain a town was known in the eleventh century as *Arrabal* (Corominas 1976). Neither El Idrisi nor Ibn Giubayr encountered on their journeys places, bearing such a name. However, Sciacca had a *Rabbatu* in 1290, Castronovo in 1300, and Palermo in 1375. In Gozo the earliest record of the name Rabat is documented in 1450.

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

It is suggested by some lexicographers that place-names preceded by an indefinite article and ending with a *T-marbuta* give an idea of possession. In grammatical terms they may be regarded as nouns in the construct state. Ir-Rabat is one of these. It is made up of “*raba*” plus the *T-marbuta*, an abbreviated form of the suffix ‘*atum*’ used in Classical Arabic for the feminine, as explained by Professor Aqulina in his *Maltese-Arabic Comparative Grammar*. Michele Amari notes in his *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula* (1880) that “*raba*” is the plural of “*rab*” which means a “field with houses”. If this is the case the new etymology of Ir-Rabat could shed new light on the early history of Gozo's old town.

Further consideration is suggested following the new revelations about the report of Gilibertus Abate, Governor of Malta, who in c.1241 sent Frederick II an account of the taxes assessed in the *castrum* of Gozo. The original report is lost, probably destroyed with other important documents by the Nazis in 1943. A copy of it had been reproduced in 1888 by Edward Winklemann in his *Acta Imperii Inedita Siculi XIII* (Innsbruck, 1888). Recent studies on it by Illuminato Perì (1967), Vella (1975) and Luttrell (1979) show that it contains discrepancies which may have been caused by some omission in Winklemann's copy. It is the first documented evidence of the ancient town of Gozo during the Middle Ages. It was then considered one of the three important *castri* of the Maltese Islands.

Castrum

Three considerations would seem to be in order here. The first is to consider whether at the time of Gilibertus in Gozo there was a *Castello* or a walled *borgo*., or whether there were both. In this latter case there would have been two *castri* in Gozo, and consequently the number of *castri* in the archipelago would not have been three as stated in some documents but four. The second consideration is about the size of the *castrum*. Gilibertus' *castrum* contained a population of 366 families, Christian, Arab, and Jewish, as well as their animals, their *centimoli*, their *tube*, their *concerie*, and their *tintorie*. Which of the two *castri* could hold at least 2000 people? A small round *Castello* on the hill or a walled *borgo* that was at least four times its size (Luttrell 1979)? A third consideration is that at the time the Anjovins took over the islands from the Hohenstaufen in 1263, there was no particular *Castellano* for Gozo.

It was only after 1276, when the island was attacked by the Genoese and depopulated, that there appeared for the first time a *Castellano* who was entrusted with the civic and military administration of the island. It is suggested that the presence of a *Castellano* could only appear when some type of castle was built. Documents on Gozo from the *Archivio di Stato di Napoli* analysed by Laurenzia and Ruggiero Moscati are abundantly clear. Arman Muntanier, a contemporary writer present during the take-over of Gozo from the Anjovins, records that admiral Loria first took the town and then he laid siege to the castle before its Anjovin leaders finally gave up (Agius de Soldanis). Later documentation, provided by the will of Gulielmo de Malte made in 1299, gives proof that this castle was the exclusive fortified home of the *Castellano* and his intimate *servientes* or collaborators. It also served as a place of exile for noble dissenters of the Aragonese rulers (Bresc 1974).

The Development of Gozo's Historiography

Until the nineteen-thirties very little had been written on Gozo. Interest in history gained momentum soon after the publication of Dun Ġuzepp Farrugia's translation of Agius de Soldanis' *Il Gozo Antico e Moderno* in 1936. A number of history books and historical guides on Gozo were since put in print. The list is long and not possible to reproduce here in full. I pick some titles at random. In 1937 Gatt published *A Guide to Gozo*, a pictorial guide, amply illustrated with photographs by Carmelo Buhagiar, Gozo's top photographer. About the same time Dunstan G. Bellanti published his work *Why Malta? Why Ghawdex?* a work of linguistic and toponymic interest. Publications practically stopped during World War II, but soon after came the big drive from the newly set up St Michael's College of Education. Its principal, Bro Leo Barrington, laid the foundation for more scientific research in history with his publication of *Malta, Our Island Home*, a tiny booklet intended for use by school teachers. A number of undergraduates from St Michael's College of Education, enkindled with enthusiasm for Malta's past, undertook postgraduate courses in history. A Faculty of History was set up at the University of Malta, and in compliment to the *Archivio Storico di Malta*, the *Melita Historica* became the venue for the more important historical articles. After the early sixties there appeared Brian Blouet's *Gozo*, Trump's *Malta: An Archaeological Guide* (1972); and lately Fr Charles Cini's

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

priceless contribution, *Gozo: the Roots of an Island*, in which top Maltese scholars such as Bonanno, Wettinger, De Lucca and Buhagiar have important articles on the various aspects of Gozo, historic, economic and artistic.

There are besides, these writers, other scholars who wrote important papers and books on Gozo. Luttrell (1975) wrote a report on *The Gozo Castello* for UNESCO. Chapter eight in Hoppen (1979), *The Fortifications of Malta by the Order of St John*, might be more illuminating particularly if read in conjunction with Bresc's article (A. Luttrell's translation) *Malta dopo il Vespro Siciliano* (MH, Vol. 7, No. 3 1974). The story of the origin of the earlier *Castello* has not yet been told. Bezzina's version (1993) of its development from an ancient *acropolis* to a medieval *cittadella* is not very convincing. It takes too much after Agius de Soldanis whose aim was that of glorifying his island-home with an early Christianization and a privileged antiquity for both the aristocratic and the ecclesiastics in the *Castello*.

This *Castello* was generally regarded as an old medieval fortification where the nobles of the island had their homes and where the ordinary inhabitants found refuge in times of attacks by the corsairs. For some it was also the symbol of the Aragonese Crown represented by lords ready to extract taxes and anxious to secure loyalty and obedience through oppression. Like in Sicily, the Gozo *Castello* was indeed the fortified abode of these pitiless feudal lords. But in real fact it was 'the city of administration' (Thake 1994). Until the late Middle Ages few were privileged with a residence within its gates, except, of course, the political dissenters who needed extra supervision and were kept in seclusion, isolated from the rest of the community in some remote part of the *Castello*. It was only after the threat of Hafsid corsairs increased during the earlier half of the fifteenth century that occasionally its gate began to be raised for the *popolo minuto* who were panicking with fear and distress due to the lack of security. By then the *Castello* was literally in ruins and there were hardly any people left willing to repair it. Disease and hunger were rampant and those, who could find means of transport, were ready to leave the island (Leopardi 1960).

Documentation is not scarce from this period onwards. The *capitoli* in the Palermo archives are a real source of light on this awkward situation as

shown in specialized papers on the subject by eminent scholars. In the *Archivio Storico di Malta*, Moscati, Laurenza and Valentini had already brought to our notice the works of Gianbruno and Genuardi and Winklemann. Later in *Melita Historica*, E. Leopardi (1960) and J. Galea also wrote interesting articles. More recently Bresc, Luttrell and Wettinger increased further the bibliography on the period. Further studies are in preparation by Wettinger on the toponyms.

Besides this written material, unwritten sources are also numerous. The derelict houses within the *Castello* as well as the architecture of those still standing might tell more truth than the numerous articles told to tourists. These are often told that the ruins date from the earthquake of 1693 and that the "gothic" windows are reminders of the Normans. A report of 1693 drawn immediately after the earthquake says, however, that the damage caused was almost insignificant and that the fallen houses, some sixteen in number, had fallen in disuse since the modernization of the *Castello* during the early decades of the seventeenth century. The architecture of one of the standing houses was identical to that of Palazzo Montalto in Syracuse or other Ventimiglia palaces in other parts of Sicily (Luttrell 1979). These Ventimiglia, one must recall, were for a long time very powerful on the island, particularly when Malta fell under their control as part of the quadripartite which ruled over Sicily after the death of Frederick IV. An old well, still extant under the present Cathedral, once stood in front of the chapel of the Annunciation. This could have made an important part of a medieval *piazza* before the restructuring of the old *Matrice* during the closing decade of the sixteenth century. The present *piazza* was then still inexistent. Its site was occupied by a block of old buildings acquired and demolished by the Chapter of the Collegiate in 1706 to make room for the flight of steps leading to Gafà's magnificent church.

Misinterpretation of Terms

An important source relating to the history of Rabat are the *capibrevi*, *bandi* and other official decrees sent to the *curia Gaudisii*. Pity that some terms relating to Gozo are often misinterpreted. The term *Terra* is a classic example. For some writers it is just another term for territory. In the late middle ages it was, however, used to describe an urbanized centre in a distant rural area of a diocese. It contained a number of *casalia*

and had at its centre a *Castello* and/or a walled *borgo*. This *borgo* held in it a "Tokk" with administrative buildings as well as houses of Government and of defence. Yet the central administration was conducted from the *Castello*. Consequently the *Castello* and the *terra* became almost synonymous. Until the middle of the thirteenth century Sicily had 150 of these *terre*. Gozo, however, was not one of them. Notaries then used the term *castrum* to signify the walled *borgo*. The *Castello* was known as *qas'r*, an Arabic term which the Sicilians latinized as *cassarum*. During the latter half of the fourteenth century Gozo was often referred to in official documents as *terra et insula Gaudisii*.

medieval ecclesiastical terms are likewise as confusing. Take the term *parrochia*. There were then three types of churches in that category. Some were called *parocchia*, others *cappella*. The former was generally supported by the *elemosina* of the people, the latter by benefices, usually bequeathed by a baron or some other feudal patron. In Malta because of the distance from the Cathedral at Mdina, they had a baptismal font. The Gozo *Castello* was also privileged with a *cappella*. Such *cappelle* were also authorised to administer not only baptism but also other sacraments and to hold divine office and other liturgical services, including Mass, on Sundays and feast-days. A *cappella* with a baptismal font was called *chiesa baptisimale*, that administering other sacraments *chiesa sacramentale* (Magri 1649) The Cathedral was then the only parish church of the diocese. However, it could delegate the *cura animarum* to a particular church in distant towns on the periphery of the diocese that were cut off physically from the Cathedral. Towns that were traditionally the site of the old Roman *oppidum* and whose parish organization dated from the beginning of its Christianization also kept their parish status. After the Fourth Lateran Council these early parishes had the duty of setting their own cemetery attached to them and to bury or refuse Christian burial to those who disobeyed the Precepts of the Church. They alone had the right to administer to the faithful the sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist during Pentecost (Addis, *et. 1883*).

One other term which is ambiguous and needing clarification is *Matrice*. The term was defined by Wettinger (1973) as 'a parish which had at least one other parish that was dismembered from it'. Alessandro Bonnici (1975) discussed the term in an almost identical way, suggesting, as is contained in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, that a church could be called

Matrice because of three main reasons. It could, among other things, be a church which was more important than others. Luttrell (1975) explains that a *Matrice* 'is not necessarily a parish from which at least another parish was dismembered'. In a recent paper Fiorini (1995) confirms that judging from the contents of a fifteenth-century document 'it is clear that the term matrix is used here in opposition to the smaller chapels abutting onto the major structure'. This naturally changes the whole concept of the *castello's Matrice* as a "Mother of Churches" in Gozo and brings it closer to the historical truth of being "a Mother-Church" for other smaller churches in the neighbourhood (Longhitano 1977). The myth of the *Matrice* as Mother of Churches is probably the consequence of legends about the origin of the *Castello* within which it stands.

The Story of the Castello

Up to the end of the sixteenth century the *Castello* or *Castellaccio* was just a small round medieval fort on Borg Gheritu, a tiny flat-topped hill some 400 meters to the north of Rabat (Bosio, G. *Historia*. See also Boisgelin 1804). In 1599, almost 50 years after its sacking by the Muslim corsair Sinam Pasha, Giovanni Rinaldini, an Italian military engineer, made plans for a better and more modern city near Marsalforn and advised that the *borgo* together with its *Castello* should be razed to the ground. Funds, however, were lacking, and the intrigues that followed from a handful of noble land-owners who owned land at Ghajn Damma and from one or two high ranking members of the clergy who were afraid lest they might lose their position, disrupted Rinaldini's good work. Until a decision was taken by the Council, Grand Master Garzes proposed the modernization of the old *Castello*. Work started in 1599 and by 1622 the crown work was ready (Hoppen). Enquiries on the suitability of the new site were carried out with various other consultants. In 1640 Francesco Bonamici testified before Inquisitor Tempi that Ghajn Damma was blessed with nature's best gifts, water, good stone, vicinity to a harbour, and security. He also drew plans for the fortifications and estimated for the cost of works. In 1670, Maurizio Valperga, another Italian engineer, came with different plans. He advised on new fortifications around both Rabat and the *Castello*, assuring that these could resist any siege for longer months. His recommendations concerned *particolarmente il Castello, che potrebbe servire in ogni evento, come d'una cittadella*.

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

The history of the *Castello* before the thirteenth century is nowhere documented. What has been written about it is, in all probability, an eighteenth century fabrication. The earliest story, as we often hear it today, was written by an anonymous 'historian' in 1704. This is the story he told:

Il castello è antichissimo sendo fabbricato in un medesimo tempo che fù fabricata la città notabile, e ciò prima della passione di Cristo nostro Signore qual castello dall'anno 1551: in quella parte prima della depredazione di detta isola è stata una città a campione di quella di detta Notabile et aveva la sua porta Reale sin ove vi è situata la Croce per pi quattro venti. Ia per questo detta contrada si dice di Porta Reale e le sua mura circondavano la maggior parte di detto borgo, e ivi sono sin al presente li vestigii di dette mura. e stimando allora la Sacra religione Gerosilomitano che l'isola suddetta non sarebbe mai popolata da poter munire con gente, e guardare una simile città, fu ristretto castello, come al presente si ritrova, il quanto è ben nutrito e fortificato con sue mura e bastioni ben alti ed eminenti con suo fosso per parte di levante, mezzodì, e ponente, per tramontana però far maggior parte tutto rocca ruina somigliante alle mura di detta Città Notabile.

The story appears to have been well received. In 1714 Dott. Gio. Giuseppe Caxaro added more details to it. In 1727 Can. Adeodato Formosa in a memorandum asking for the recognition of the title of *Insigne* for his *Matrice*, sent to the *Sacra Congregazione* in Rome the story of the above quoted anonymous writer. A covering letter to an influential Monsignore recommended, for the love of the Virgin Mary, that the petition be considered with urgency. In compensation for his good services Can. Formosa promised 500 *scudi*. The following is the story contained in the memorandum in support of the alleged antiquity of the *Matrice*:

L'essere la nostra Colleggiata fondata ed eretta in un luogo non poco conspicuo costa dalle ragioni infrascritti. Poichè il Gozo fù anticamente Città abitata dalle più famose e valorose Nazioni, ch'avessero mai signoreggiato nel mondo che fù città si vede ocularmente dai vestigii, che sin a questi tempi s'osservano dell'antiche mura, e dal nome dalle tre porte che nella menzionata città vi erano, ch'ancor vi rimane, e sono la porta Reale ch'era situata verso la Croce, la porta della Fontana che guarda verso mezzogiorno, e la porta del Garbo che era fabricare dietro di Sabina che guarda a ponente.

About twenty years later Agius de Soldanis also repeated the same version of the origin of the *Castello*. He confesses, however, that there were no written documents to support it. The following is his description:

Principava il suo muro, dove oggi siede il castello dalla parte di Levante e tramontana, dimezzava il podere della haġġeria persino l'altro detto habel ta l'esptar, ed in questa strada, dove appunto è situata la croce de' limiti della S. Matrice Chiesa, il luogo vien chiamato della porta principale della città, ta port rial, dove finisce la clausura sudetta tal habel ta l'esptar v'era il secundo muro verso la parte di mzzo di sino alla punta quasi del cimitero posto vicino alla chiesa di S. Agostino, sotto questo bastione o sia muroeravi la strada si oggi appellata ta wara isour, aveva la sua porta il bastione che riguardava la stradadella gran Fontana chiamata bieb il haijn: da quella punta del cimitero il bastione si stendeva in sotto il castello, posto alla volta di ponente, in questo fuvvi la terza porta detta bieb el gharb.

This fabricated story of the classic origin of Gozo's old town had by the beginning of the nineteenth century become the basis of the island's history. Onorato Bres regarded the *Castello* as the product of the Greeks. So also imagined Boisgelin. Caruana (1898) called it *acropolis* and described the *Tat-Tomba* district as the suburb of *Gaylos*. Others, after him, blew the same trumpet and in 1907 Mgr Luigi Vella, who was then compiling a history of Gozo, recorded in his *Nicol Ghabdul*, a historical novel about the last years of the Muslims in Malta, that the walls of Gozo's *Castello* bounded:

mill-bidu tat-triek ta Fomm il-Gir, illum tal Cabuccini, dan is-sur chien jibka sejjer sal misrah ta San Frangisk, minn hawna chien ighaddi ma tul it triek tal Vajringa sal misrah ta Santu Wistin, jinzel lejn it triek tad Dawwara sa wara ta Ghedrin biex jibka sejjer sakemm jakat ir-Rabat min-nahha tal Lvant. Minn erbgha bibien kbar cont tista tidhol ir-Rabat.

This description fits almost perfectly into some artistic impressions of ancient Rabat. A design, probably by the Capuchin Padre Luigi Bartolo, is contained in Agius de Soldanis' *Il Gozo Antico e Moderno*. A similar impression was drawn by a certain Rénatus Carabott for John Bezzina in 1970 and reproduced in *Telstar u l-Berqa*. In his

booklet *The Gozo Citadel* published in 1993, Rev. Dr Joseph Bezzina also reproduced a map showing the same hypothetical delineation of the old town. All three are almost identical and are a visual reproduction of the description first fabricated in 1704 and later repeated by clerics Can. Formosa and Agius De Soldanis.

Different Topography

Documented evidence proposes a different topography of the urbanized centre during the late Middle Age. There was a castle on top of a small hill, a walled-town some 400 paces away, and two *casali* or *hadjarijas* with hardly ten houses in each. The walled-town, called by the Romans *Gaulos oppidum*, was the abode of the people or *plebs*. It had its own *Toccu*, where the *Banca Giuratale* stood, its market place and a parish church then referred to as *parroecia terre et insule gaudisii*. It was enclosed within a wall which had entrances on all four sides. The main entrance or gate was called *Putirjal*. The walls of this town were still extant when the Knights of St John came to Malta in 1530. Bosio in his *Historia* describes how the Governor of the island on his first visit was received at the town's main gate and how he was then accompanied with pomp flanked by soldiers on horseback until the gate leading to the stairs of the *Castello*. When Bishop Cagliares established the parish boundaries between the *Matrice* of St Mary and the Parish Church of St George in 1623 these same walls served as demarcation line. D. H. Trump was very specific about the town's boundaries. According to him they could be traced almost accurately by plotting the different necropoleis around it. Graves were, in fact, found (and recorded) in various localities outside a radius of about half a mile from the centre of the ancient quarters of Rabat.

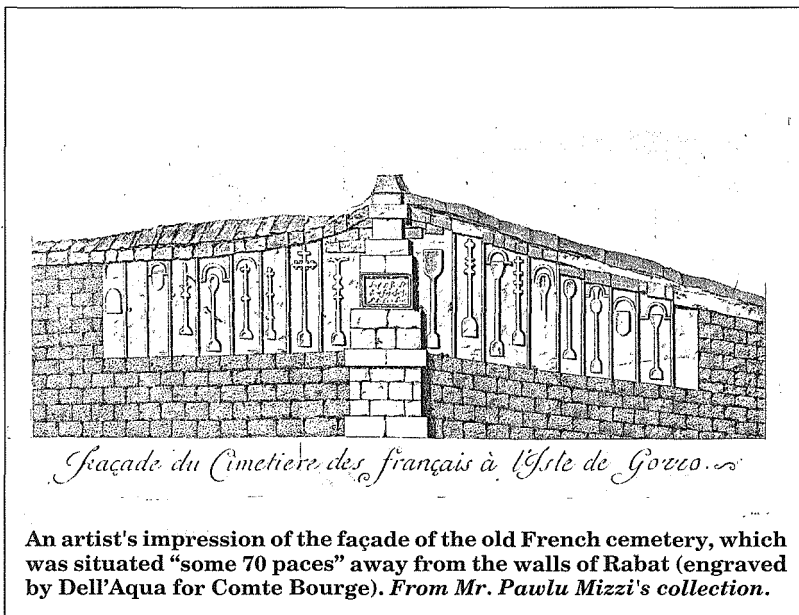
On the south, along Il-Vajringa, Caruana uncovered an extensive Punic and Roman burial place; on the east, in St Francis Square and along Taht ta' Putirjal (erroneously called Main Gate Street) Caruana also unearthed a number of Roman hypogea; on the north all along Il-Ħaġarija, not far from the ditch of the *Castello* and across *Salita del Castello* about one hundred graves with human remains were found (Caruana 1889); on the western side, from Sabina Square to Fuq it-Tomba (also mysteriously renamed St Augustine Square) there were various medieval cemeteries, Muslim and Christian. Within the area enclosed by these boundaries the

activity of man has been amply recorded. Remains of various historical phases, from the Bronze Age to late medieval. Pottery from the late Tarxien phase was found at It-Tokk and in St George's Square. Punic inscription, found "not near the citadel" speaks of the people and their temples (Vella 1995), while another, much later in date, of their government and their Roman *municipium*. (Bonanno 1993). Roman coins and other inscriptions were found beneath St George's church. Other important remains include a Byzantine seal, olive crushers, huge medieval stone mills and Muslim pottery (AMR 1905-1962).

It is indeed a pity that the continuous environmental changes that took place during the past 3000 years are often overlooked when the original size of Gozo's old town is discussed. During the Bronze Age the earliest urbanized site could not have been bigger than a small field with a few detached stone huts on it. In Semitic terminology it was only a "rab" – a field with houses (Amari 1880). In Roman times it developed into an *oppidum* that is a walled-town. The Kufic graves unearthed in Sabina Square suggest that until the twelfth century its shape and size had not changed.

Medieval documents often referred to this *oppidum* as *castrum* (Winklemann). Then during the latter half of the thirteenth century another *castrum* was set up on a hill some 400 meters outside its northern wall. This was the home of the *Castellano* after 1276, when Reynaldi de Palearia began to be entrusted with its custody (Moscati). Since then at least two other settlements must have grown just beneath the walls of this *Castello*. These were similar to the types of *casali* also existing in Sicily in the vicinity of feudal castles. These *casali* could be as small as having only three houses but they could be bigger, very rarely though more than ten houses (Perì). A *casale*, which in Arab speaking countries were also sometimes called *hagarija* meaning a small settlement of *hu gar* (small houses), also had its own *cappella*. During the fifteen century there were two of these *cappelle*, one dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the other to Saint James. In 1545 Bishop Cubelles included them as parishes in his list of churches but in 1575 they were suppressed because they had neither a parish priest nor parishioners.

Tangible traces of this old town were destroyed as a result of uncontrolled urban development after the sixteenth century. In 1603 Grand Master



Wignacourt ordered Vittorio Cassar to pull down the *muraglia* of Rabat. With it two *hadjariji* were completely lost. Another monument which has been lost is the old cemetery of Rabat until 1946 called "Ic-Ċimiterju ta' fejn Santu Wistin". Its disappearance is perhaps the gravest loss for the national heritage. Originally there were two cemeteries: a small "French" cemetery and a bigger one referred to as early as 1435 as *cimitero di San Agostino*. The latter cemetery had some ten small chapels built on it. Some, however, were in a bad state when Mgr Dusina visited them in 1575. The smaller one was about seventy paces outside the walls of Rabat and had a perimeter of two hundred paces. There was in it a chapel, which was a *patronato regii*, dedicated to St John the Evangelist. It also had at least twenty eight graves with carved tomb stones all belonging to members of the nobility said to have accompanied the saintly king Louis of France on a Crusade to Tunis in 1276. In 1575 both cemeteries were considered a lair for thieves. After the establishment of the parochial boundaries of the two Rabat parishes in 1623, this small cemetery as well as its *contiguo altro cimitero di San Agostino* began to be blessed during a procession from the *Matrice* on all Souls Day. In 1757 Bishop Alpheran de Bussan built a new boundary wall around the two cemeteries.

Interpretation of Historical Remains

The search for the ancient town becomes even more complicated as one digs deeper into the darkness of time. Links with the ancient world are often intraceable – sometimes even deviated by inaccurate narratives or misconceived provenance of historic relics.

The M. Vallio marble stone encased in one of the sides of the old gate of the *Castello* is one of these loose ends. It cannot be seriously considered as a documented evidence of the antiquity of the *Castello* unless accompanied by details of its provenance. The stone came from the old Roman town where similar inscriptions on marble have been found. As it stands, however, it is doubtful whether the stone was put there to document a historic event or used as just another block of ordinary masonry brought from another place to fit into the construction of the wall. Similar stones were often used for this latter purpose. One was also once encased in a corner of the garden wall of the Capuchins' convent and another in the base of St George's church.

Another loose end in the history of Gozo's ancient town and one which deserves particular attention in our study is the gothic chalice in the Museum of the Gozo Cathedral. Here again no decent legend tells a story. Yet many know that this chalice was found in the old façade of St George's church and it is probably one of the two chalices mentioned by the Vigar General, Can Pier Francesco Pontremoli in his report of the Pastoral Visit in 1633 (ACM 56). This chalice may lead to further clues in the complicated jigsaw-puzzle of this ancient town's past. It is the earliest ecclesiastic Christian relic found so far on the island, identical in its gothic shape to those used in Mozarabic Spain during the 8th and 9th centuries.

A similar type of chalice was also used by Greek priests who were sent to evangelize the Muslim communities in liberated towns in South-eastern Sicily. These Greek priests are said to have come to Malta and Gozo too and, as elsewhere, they brought with them their saints and their cults – among these St George, and the Byzantine or similar rite. Churches dedicated to St George, dating to these early times are found in Catania, Caltagirone and in other towns on the eastern half of Sicily. Gozo, too, has the parish church of its main town dedicated to St George. In addition this

In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

church had a chalice with Illyric markings, a clear sign of contact with the Greek Church, and officiated its divine services in the Gallic Rite.

There were then four parish churches in all using it. These were the Cathedral of Mdina, Naxxar and Żebbuġ in Malta, and St George's in Gozo (NLM 643). There is no indication why other churches had not used it or why it was used in the above-mentioned churches only. Indications show that with the early Christianization of the islands during the immediate decades after the end of Muslim Rule in Malta, the Arab-speaking inhabitants, like the Muslim converts in Sicily, preferred non-Latin priests to evangelize them.

When Mgr Dusina visited Malta the Gallic Rite had long been defunct. Yet it continued to feature in several documents until the sixteenth century. Magri points out that the Gallic Rite was often mixed up with the Mozarabic. It is, in fact, generally held that only the Mozarabic Rite was used among Arab-speaking Christians (Magri 1649. *cf. Mozarabico*). Reminiscence of it is still extant in Toledo where the rite has been preserved. In Malta, inhabitants still use Mozarabic liturgical terms in their daily prayers. "Alla", a variant of "Allah" used by the Mozarabics in Andalusia, is a common term in Maltese prayer books. So also are the names of the Sacraments, *maghmudija*, *qrar*, *tqarbin*, *żwieġ* and *quddies*. These terms are said to have been also common among Maronites (Aquilina 1973). They are indeed, a living monument of a time when the old town housed a mixed society of Jews, Arabs and Christians (Luttrell 1979).

Conclusion

The search for Gozo's ancient town does not stop here. Many of the old registers in archives both in Malta and abroad have hardly been dusted. So also have many of the stones of the town's humble houses, the old mill, the bakery, the tavern and all the places that had once heard the wailing of children terrorized by looting pirates. These too are waiting for the day when the young scholar, the archaeologist, the anthropologist and the social scientist could study their scars and decipher the hardships that deprived our forefathers of their rights and identity. Some may be aware of this call but are unwilling to translate that awareness in writing. They

may be scared to reject tradition. Perhaps the very thought of disclaiming what they once claimed to be as true gives them a feeling of unease. Others, on the other hand, may be too over enthusiastic to reject tradition.

It may need skill and patient research to find out whether Gozo's ancient town was in its origin an *acropolis* of an island of dreams and legends or a humble *oppidum* inhabited by real men and women once forming part of the *plebs Gaultitana*.

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In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

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In Search of Gozo's Ancient Town

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