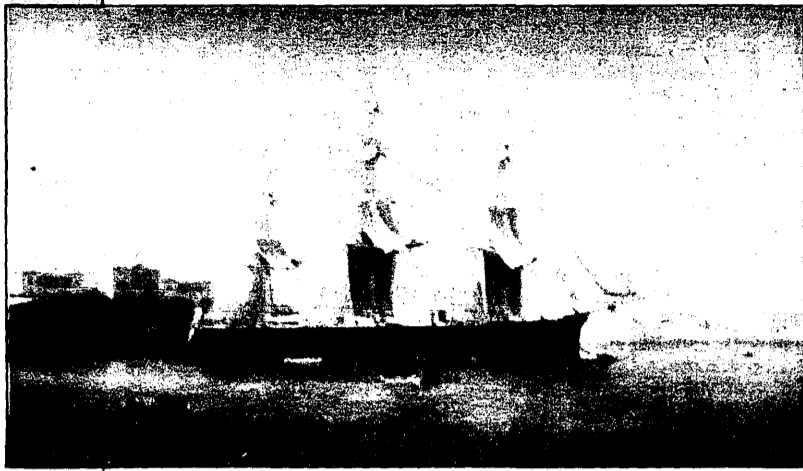


FISHING BOAT near St Paul's Islands (1874), oil on board 16.1 x 29.3 cm, signed 'Crino' (private collection)



HMS Swiftsure off Bighi (1878), oil on board 27.2 x 45.3 cm, signed 'Crino' (private collection)

# Nicolò Crescimanno and Giacomo Sanfilippo: Sicilian exiles in Malta

by Petra Bianchi



GRAFFITO signature of Nicola F. Crescimanno at Ggantija Temples, Gozo (photograph by courtesy of Dr Giovanni Bonello)

ON AUGUST 19, 1861, the Italian ship *Elettrico* arrived in Malta's Grand Harbour from Palermo. On board was yet another of the many Sicilian patriots fleeing from the political turmoil that had been raging in the Italian peninsula for most of the previous 40 years.

The tide had now turned. It was no longer the supporters of Garibaldi and Mazzini who felt compelled to leave their country, but those who had defended the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Since the reunification of Italy in 1860 it was the men who would not accept the new government of Vittorio Emanuele who felt they had to seek political exile abroad. The British colony of Malta had long been a favourite place of refuge.

The gentleman in question on this August day was Dr Giacomo Sanfilippo, a 35-year-old law graduate from the University of Palermo. On the passenger list he registered as *possidente*, land-owner. With him were his wife Maddalena, who was expecting their second child, and their small son, Filippo.

Other members of their family made the same move. Dr. Cav. Nicolò Crescimanno, already in his late 50s, father of Maddalena and cousin to Giacomo, also took a ship to Malta with his second wife Vincenza and his seven other children, and remained here until his death in 1885 at the age of 82.

Crescimanno was leaving a distinguished career in Sicily behind him. Born in 1803 in the sleepy town of Corleone – today notorious for its Mafia links – he studied law and later became a judge in Palermo, Messina and Catania. He was also president of the *Gran Corte Civile* of Cosenza, and *Procuratore Regio* (Crown Attorney) to the Criminal and Civil Courts of Trapani and later Catania. King Ferdinand himself described Crescimanno as a "jewel" among his magistrates.

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After Crescimanno's move to Malta, made for both political and religious reasons, King Vittorio Emanuele's ministers invited him to return to Sicily and continue his work there, but he refused. He was also asked to represent his compatriots in the new Italian parliament, but did not accept either. In 1862 Crescimanno wrote to King Francesco asking to be absolved of his loyalties as he was no longer able to perform the duties he had sworn to carry out. In due course he received a reply which liberated him from the oath he had taken.

Although considerably younger

than his cousin, Sanfilippo was also leaving behind a successful career. After graduating in law at 23, he was soon appointed judge for the communes of Santa Caterina and Racalmuto, a position he kept until he left Sicily in 1861.

Once in Malta, both Crescimanno and Sanfilippo began to work by taking up teaching posts. Sanfilippo, who was born in Cimirma, near Corleone, in 1826, first gave lessons in Italian and Latin, and was then appointed tutor of Italian at the Girls' Secondary School. Later he taught Italian and Latin at the private school run by the anglophile educationalist Sigismondo Savona, which opened in 1865.

In 1876 Sanfilippo was made Professor of Political Economy at the Royal University, a post he obtained by ranking first in an examination conducted by an examining board in Oxford. He held this post up to his death on October 3, 1880 at the age of 54 at his residence in Strada S. Nicola, Valletta. He published several articles on Political Economy while in Malta, both in pamphlet form and in the local newspapers such as the *Corriere Mercantile Maltese* and Savona's English-language newspaper *Public Opinion*. One of his close friendships was formed with the Latin scholar Giuseppe Zammit ('Brighella'), with whom he exchanged verses in Latin.

Crescimanno also began his work

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in Malta by giving lessons in Italian, Latin and Philosophy. In 1867 he was appointed tutor of Italian in Gozo, probably at the seminary and boarding school set up by the Sicilian Jesuits in 1866. In 1868 he became tutor of Italian and Latin at the *Liceo delle Tre Città* in Vittoriosa. In 1870 he succeeded Ferdinando Caruana Dingli as Professor of Law at the Royal University, a post he held up to his death on August 25, 1885, aged 82. There he taught International Law, Constitutional Law, Commercial Law, Criminal Law, Philosophy of Law and the History of Legislation in England and Malta. He also spent one year teaching Canon Law and Civil Law. He had a reputation of being precise and exacting, and was greatly esteemed for his vast learning and erudition.

Among Crescimanno's students were many who later distinguished themselves in their legal careers, such as Judges Paolo Debono, Giovanni Pullicino and Alfredo Parnis, and Dr Alfredo Naudi. He published several articles, among them the inaugural speech he delivered when receiving his professorship in 1870, and his opening speech at the graduation ceremony of 1880. He also wrote some poetry, including an ode on the death of Pope Pius IX in 1878, which was printed in a collection published by Achille Ferris.

Both Sanfilippo and Crescimanno settled in Malta and never returned to Sicily. They were cousins through their mothers, and the family tie was made closer still when Sanfilippo married Crescimanno's eldest daughter Maddalena in 1857. Their first child, Filippo, was born in Racalmuto, and in Malta Maddalena subsequently bore another three sons and a daughter. One of these, Francesco, was my father's maternal grandfather. Another son, Eduardo, married the sister of Ninu Cremona, the well-known nativist scholar of Maltese. Of the other three, Filippo and Concetta never married, and Nicola married but had no issue.

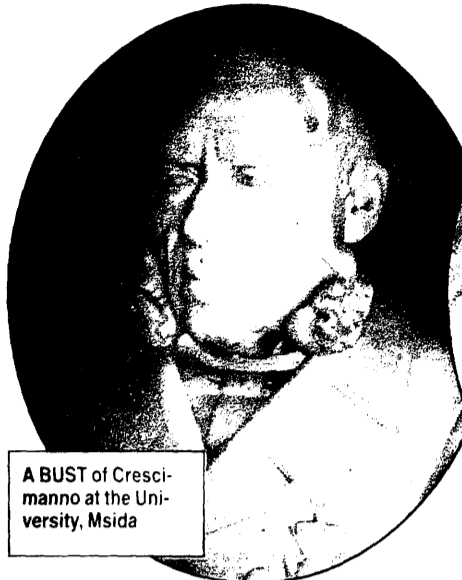
Crescimanno's other children all died childless and only one married, the youngest son Gio' Battista, who also followed the family line and read law at the Royal University, graduating in 1880. The one who remains known today is the eldest son Nicola, who became a painter and follower of the landscape artist Girolamo Gianni.

Nicola Filippo Crescimanno, who signed his paintings 'Crino', was born in 1845 in Palermo as the eldest son of Professor Nicolò Crescimanno and his second wife, Vincenza Girgenti. His father, as I have already mentioned, was born in Corleone, and his mother came from nearby Burgio. He had three brothers, Calogero, Paolo, and Gio' Battista, and four sisters, Mad-

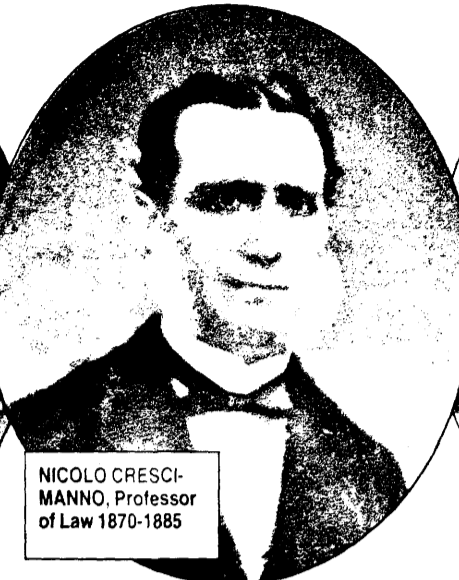
dalena, Giuseppa, Marianna and Rosalia, the latter typically named after Palermo's patron saint, Santa Rosalia. Another girl named Maria Sofia was born later in Malta but died in infancy.

When Nicola was a young boy, his father held various judicial posts all over Sicily and the family moved regularly, with Maddalena born in Corleone, Calogero in Cosenza, and Paolo in Catania. The move to Malta was made when Nicola was about 15, and like the rest of his family he continued to live here all his life. He died aged 64 of a brain haemorrhage on September 26, 1909, at his residence at 42, Strada Ospedale, Valletta, and was buried at the Addolorata Cemetery.

The fact that all his sons had been uprooted from Sicily was evidently of some concern to the elder Nicolò. When he was already Professor of Law at the Royal University, he anonymously published an essay criticising some aspects of Italian law, not wishing to reveal his authorship for political reasons. The pamphlet is entitled *Chi da Buon Senno Tiene Cara l'Italia, ne Salvi Almanco l'Onore*. It discusses what he thought were injustices in the law of 1876 which dealt with the status of children whose fathers lost or gave up their Italian



A BUST of Crescimanno at the University, Msida



NICOLO CRESCIMANNO, Professor of Law 1870-1885



GIACOMO SANFILIPPO, Professor of Political Economy, 1876-1880

Sicilies, together with the still ongoing battle for a completely united Italy, can only have served as a strong common ground on which to base their possible friendship and collaboration in the 20 years that Gianni spent in Malta with his wife and children.

It is clear from their work that Crescimanno was influenced by Gianni's style of marine painting. He was one of the many followers of Gianni, together with artists such as Luigi Maria Galea and Giovanni Bonello. He was a skilled artist, generally working on small

marine views painted in oils. His work depicting the British battleship HMS *Swiftsure* in Grand Harbour (1878) is one of his more memorable pieces, and admirably displays his technical mastery and very defined use of colour.

The name 'Crescimanno' was often used interchangeably with 'Crescimanno'. Dr Giovanni Bonello has suggested that this could explain the signature 'Crino' on many of Nicola's paintings as a *concertina* word made up of the first and the last syllable of the surname. The diminutive ending 'ino' of course also conveniently indicated that the man in question was the younger Nicola, as both his father and grandfather bore the same Christian name.

Sources: Private Papers: V. Bonello, B. Fiorentini and L. Schiavone, *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta* (Malta, 1966); A. Koster, *Prelates and Politicians in Malta* (Assen, 1984); G. Bonello (ed.), *Girolamo Gianni in Malta* (Malta, 1994); National Archives of Malta (*Arrivals and Departures*, August 1861).

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### Crescimanno was influenced by Gianni's style of marine painting

citizen hip, as was the case of his own children and those of his daughter Maddalena and her husband Giacomo Sanfilippo.

When the Neapolitan painters Girolamo Gianni and Gennaro Donadio came to Malta in 1866, Nicola Crescimanno was 20 years old, some eight years younger than Gianni. During this first visit, Gianni and Donadio stayed at 50 Strada S. Orsola, and the Crescimanno household was only a few doors down at no. 80. This proximity makes it possible to speculate that the young Nicola may then have seen the landscape paintings that Gianni displayed at his lodgings, and thereby already become acquainted with him at this early stage of Gianni's stay in Malta. Some of Crescimanno's early paintings dated 1869 already display signs of Gianni's influence, although they are not yet as accomplished as his later work.

I am not familiar with the political leanings of Girolamo Gianni, or even with those of the younger Nicola Crescimanno, which may have been different from those of his staunchly monarchist father. But the close links between the cities of Palermo and Naples as part of the former Kingdom of the Two

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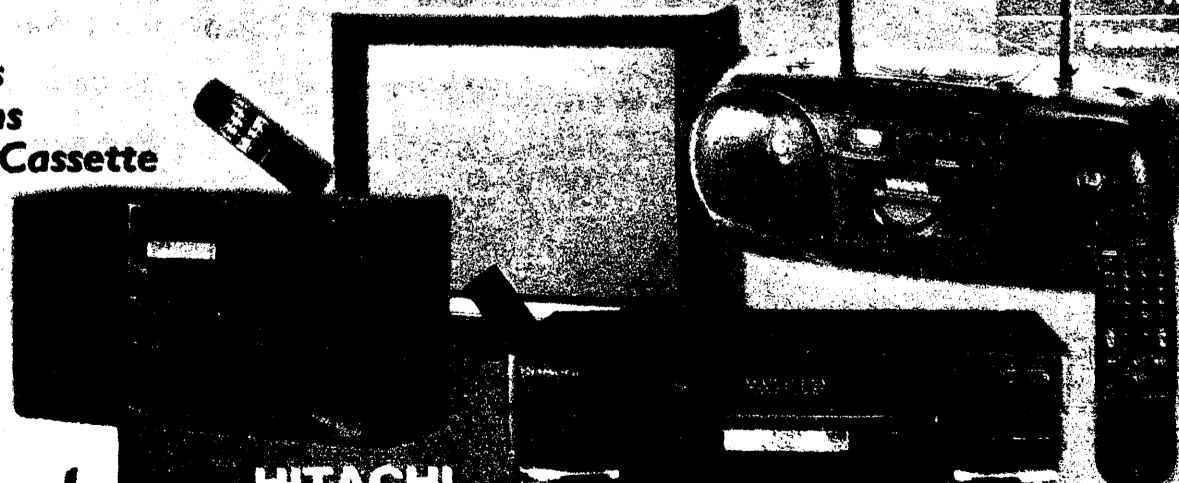
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