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Short Sketch of the
Maltese Nobility

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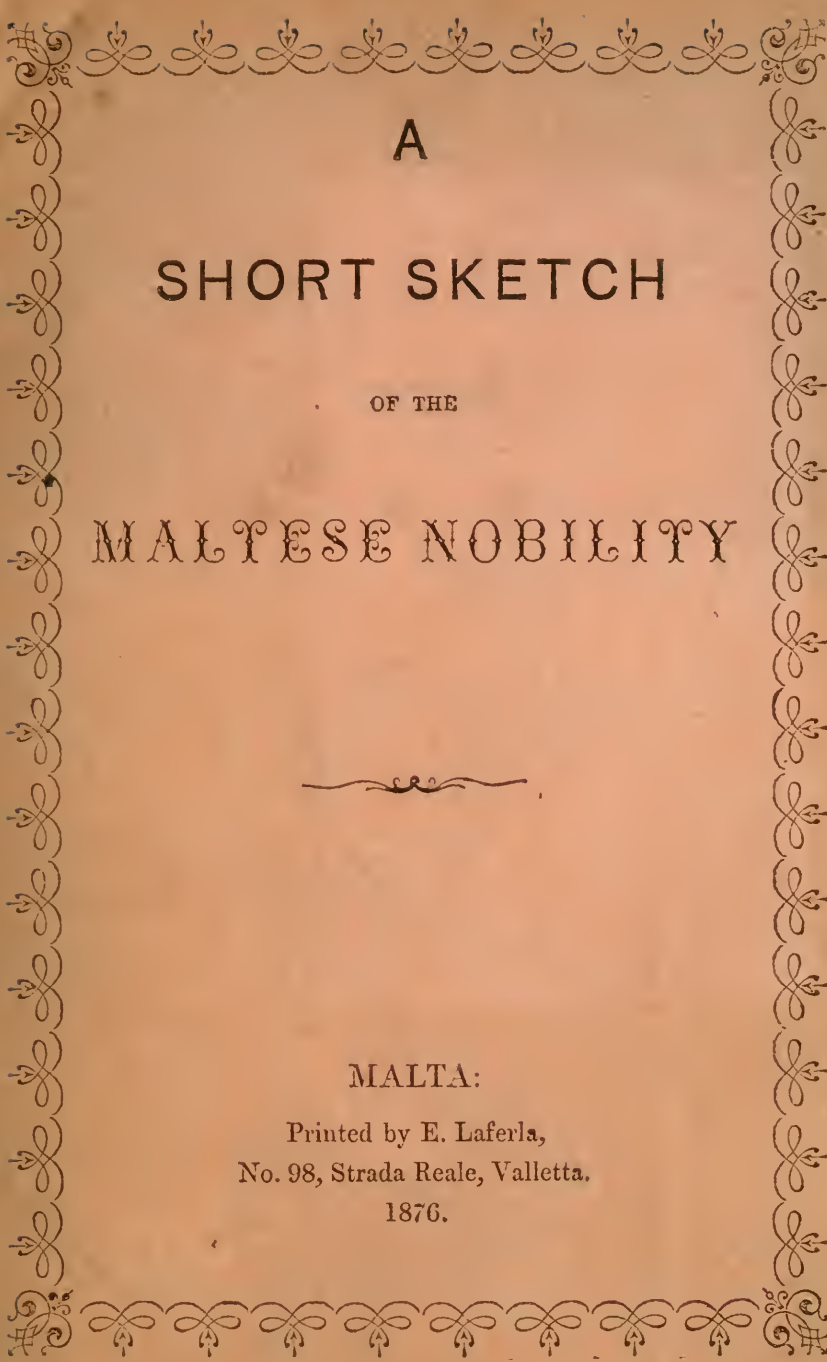


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OF THE
MALTESE NOBILITY

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A SHORT SKETCH OF THE MALTESE NOBILITY.

—
“Noblesse oblige.”

“A state of perfect equality can subsist only among beings possessing equal talents and equal virtues; but such beings are not men,” hence the necessity of a nobility, or aristocracy, or privileged class in all states whether they be monarchical or republican. Different, therefore, are the privileges accorded to the nobility or aristocracy of each country as different are its laws and institutions.

In England the opinion seems to prevail that the peers are the nobility, an opinion as erroneous as it is fallacious, as has been clearly proved by several learned authors. It is true that the peers of the realm enjoy certain privileges from which the other members of the aristocracy or nobility are excluded, but it does not arise in consequence that the younger sons of dukes, marquesses, &c., are less noble than their fathers or elder brothers,—otherwise there would be a manifest contradiction in the rules of precedence observed in the United Kingdom. The peers are only, as it were, the representatives or mandataries of their respective families. But whatever may be the English custom, it is far from being so in many European countries, but more especially in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy and Russia. This latter country is said to contain 580,000 nobles; Austria on a late enumeration 239,000; Spain, in 1785, 479,000; and France, during the first revolution, 365,000; numbers which could never have swelled so much if only the actual possessors of titles or heads of families were to be considered as forming the nobility.

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Malta, so far, follows the customs of these countries, for though in many cases the title belongs exclusively to the first born of the family, the other members are not the less noble, are always considered as part and parcel of the Nobility, and are, moreover, allowed the titles of "dei Marchesi," "dei Conti," or "dei Baroni," as the case may be. The Maltese patriciate at present is estimated to consist of only 85 individuals.

That the Maltese Nobility is of great antiquity, and can bear to be compared with that of any other country, all those who are conversant with the history of this illustrious Island can attest; but as even persons who pretend to be omniscient are wont to insinuate that it is not of long standing, the writer will make no apology for briefly stating some of the most important points of its history, and enumerating a few of the privileges and prerogatives which it formerly enjoyed.

Malta can boast of an aristocracy from the time of the Grecian occupation—B. C. 757—when this island enjoyed perfect autonomy, and was governed by a hereditary senate and by its Arcons, Protos and Amphipolias, who amongst other privileges, enjoyed that of coining medals, the form of government being Aristo-democratic.

Livy attests—Lib. XXI. c. 52—that when the Romans (A. U. C. 532—B. C. 234) expelled the Carthaginians from this island, they took more than two thousand prisoners, who were all sold at Marsala, with the exception of those of *noble birth*. (*) By the Romans the Maltese were formed into a municipality, granting them equal rights with the other sub-

(*) "A Lilybaeo, consul, Hierone cum classe regia demisso relictoque praetore ad tuendam Siciliae oram ipse in insulam Melitam quae a Carthaginiensibus tenebatur trajecit: adveniēti Hamilear Gisconis filius praefectus praesidii cum paulo minus duobus millibus militum oppidumque cum insula traditur. Inde post paucos dies reditum Lilybaeum, captivique et a consule et a praetore praeter insignes nobilitate viros sub corona venierunt."

jects, as well as the privilege of sending ambassadors to the senate. That a patriciate existed later is also further fully proved by Cicero—*Lib. XIII. epist. 52, M. T. Cic, Regi*—wherein honorable mention is made of Aulus Licinius Aristoteles a Maltese patrician; and in one of his best orations—in *Verrem*—he speaks of Diodorus the Maltese, whom he calls a noble, *domi nobilis* (B. C. 70), and in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke the Evangelist calls St. Publius *Προτοσ* or *primus*, that is Prince of the Island.

Besides, many are the inscriptions, which from time to time have been found, recording the names of distinguished Maltese, honored with such titles as that of Decurion, Knight &c. during this epoch. The following, translated into Italian by the learned Monsignor Bres, will serve as an illustration:

L · Castriccio · Della · Tribù · Quirina
Prudente · Cavaliere · Romano
Il · Primo · Dei · Maltesi
Arcipatrono · E · Flamine
Del · Dio · Augusto

Very many of the present noble families descend in direct line from the Normans, who under Count Roger (A. D. 1090) expelled the Arabs, as Commendatore Abela (who died in 1655) clearly attests in his *Malta Illustrata*. It was the Normans who established in Malta, in the same manner as they did in Sicily, the different ranks of the population, that is: Barons, Nobles, Yeomen, Citizens, Burgesses and Rustics, and they also were the first to grant to this island representative institutions.

During the Aragonese dominion, 13th to 16th century, the nobles, who were more than a hundred in number, possessed rich fiefs, kept both horse and foot soldiers at their own private expense, and were invested with the chief military command, as well as with executive authority, and king Ferdinand in 1495 granted them the exclusive privilege to keep falcons. The Governorship of the Island was for a long time

hereditary in the family of Inguanez, whose descendants are extant to this very day; the Castle, now known as St. Angelo was hereditary in that of Nava, who, together with the Gattos, enjoyed a special right to keep galleys, and by this means rendered a signal service to King Alphonsus during the war in Barbary. Baron John de Nava, Royal *Alcayde*, who greatly distinguished himself in the affair of Gerbe in 1432, by his will, drawn in the acts of the Notary Graziano Vassallo, on the 1st of November, 1487, disposed of the said castle, together with the title of *Alcayde*, and the Barony of Marsa in favour of his eldest son Peter. And the nobles were then held in such estimation, that when King Alphonsus the magnanimous was returning victorious, in 1432, from Barbary, he did not disdain to dwell in the house of an Inguanez, as well as to order that their arms should be placed on one of the chief gates of Notabile by the side of his own.

Margaret of Aragon (obit 1418), from whom the Testaferratas, Scoberras, Stagnos, &c. descend, and daughter of Count William of Aragon, natural son of Frederick III. possessed amongst others the fiefs of *Marnesi* and *Bahria*, the former of which is still owned by a Testaferrata and the latter by a Stagno. That she was of blood royal is clearly proved from the words which Frederick III. used on the 7th April, 1365, in his diploma granting certain prerogatives to James Pellegrino, a Maltese noble, husband to the above-named Margaret :

“ Fridericus &c. Presentis scripti serie notum fieri volumus universis, quod ad humilem supplicationem noviter Excellentiae Nostrae factam per Nobilem Margaritam de Aragonia, consortem Jacobi de Pellegrino, Militis, Consanguineam, familiarem et fidelem nostram eidem Nobili concedimus gratiose, &c.”

When John de Mazara and Antonio Falsone were deputed as ambassadors to King Alphonsus, they were thus styled in royal decree given at Naples on the 11th of March, 1438:

“Nuperrime autem per Nobiles et fideles Nostros Joannem de Mazara Melitens. et Judicem Antonium de Falsone ipsius Civitatis, Ambasciatores Majestati Nostrae, &c.

Moreover, the late Dr. Gio. Antonio Vassallo, Professor of Italian Literature in the University, in his well known History of Malta says, that it is undoubted that during the 15th century the class of nobles was numerous, amongst whom not a few were exceedingly rich. The respectability of these Maltese citizens was well known to King Ferdinand, who when yet *Infante* was personally acquainted with Alvaro de Nava, who had lent him the sum of 3,000 gold florins (a large amount at that time), on condition that when he ascended the throne, he would grant him the fief of *Benuarrat* until the extinction of the debt. This results from a privilege signed by the said King, and dated 28th May, 1477.

Let us now see whether before the Order took possession of Malta there existed anythink like a nobility. No less an authority than Bosio, the historiographer of the renowned Order of St. John, in describing the formal entry of Grand Master Lisleadam into Notabile, November, 1530, says that the NOBLES received him on horseback near the gate, that Paolo de Nasis a *nobleman* made a speech before presenting the keys of the gate to him, the Grand Master swearing to preserve the rights and privileges of the Maltese; a ceremony repeated by every successive Grand Master down to Hompesch (*) and that Lisleadam was greatly surprised to find so many distinguished and learned persons among the nobility, as well as such a perfect knowledge of antiquity. The same historian

(*) Canon Panzavecchia in his well known work—“L'ultimo periodo della Storia di Malta”—says distinctly that G. M. de Rohan was received at the gate of Notabile, by four noble senators of the ancient families of Xara, Cassia, Bonnici and Muscati, with the Capitano di Verga, Baron Pasquale Seeberras Testaferrata, at the head of the civic cavalry.

And Baron Azopardi. C. M. G., in his “Giornale della presa di Malta e Gozo” attests that when Sir Alex. J. Ball made his entry into Valletta he was accompanied by Baron Gauci the Capitano di Verga, who was also afterwards appointed Lieutenant Governor.

goes on to say, that after returning thanks in the Cathedral the Grand Master and his suite were hospitably entertained by the patrician Michele Falsone, Royal Vice-Admiral.

During the long period which Malta was governed by the Knights of St. John, great respect and esteem continued to be shown to the Nobility, and the Grand Masters not only recognized the prerogatives and titles which they possessed, but granted new distinctions and honors to several families as a reward for signal services. During the said period titles and distinctions granted by foreign princes were also acknowledged.

The British Government, on receiving this Island spontaneously offered by the Maltese, promised in the most solemn manner to maintain and defend their religion, rights and privileges, (*) and indeed, up to no very remote period, great deference was on all occasions shown to the Nobility, when, for unknown reasons, the nobles, those who have been a privileged class for more than nineteen centuries, were put aside and slighted in the most unwarrantable manner.

That the Maltese Nobility have been considered from time immemorial as a privileged and distinct class will result from the following facts:

The Barons or possessors of fiefs had, up to the 18th century, the right to sit in the National Council or *Consiglio Popolare*, and the other nobles were entitled to elect and depute as their representatives in the said Council a certain number of their own Body, a circumstance which alone suffices to prove that the nobles, ever since the institution of the Council—A. D. 1090—were considered as a corporate body or body politic.

(*) Besides several Proclamations, this is further confirmed by Sir A. L. Ball in a despatch addressed to the Right Hon. William Pitt, on the 28th. February, 1807: "You are aware, Sir, that when the British took possession of the Island it was stipulated that the privileges of the Maltese should be preserved, and their ancient laws continued in force."

The learned Dr. Vassallo thus describes the *Consiglio Popolare* in his justly celebrated history:

The *Consiglio Popolare* was a National representative institution of members elected by the free suffrage of the notable citizens. Each head of a family had a right to vote, and entitled to be represented were the Nobles, the Esquires or well-to-do citizens, Professors, secular Priests, and up to 1466 Merchants and Tradesmen. The Feudatories or Barons and the high Church dignitaries (such as the Bishop, Archdeacon, &c.) formed part of the *Consiglio jure proprio*.

The *Capitano di Verga* (or Governor of Notabile and Island of Malta and Colonel of the Militia); the Governor of Gozo; the Vice-Admiral; the *Segreto*, or administrator of government property; the first three jurats of Notabile and the first two of Valletta; the Lieutenants or Commanders of the Three Cities, — Vittoriosa, Senglea and Cospicua; the President of the Water Supply; the President and Commissaries of the *Monte di Pietà*; the President of the Civil Hospitals, and the Depositary of the Universities, were all exclusively chosen from the Nobility, commencing from the 12th century and ending with Sir Thomas Maitland's administration. And that Governor on abolishing some of those employments, by way of compensation, instituted (*) the office of Lord Lieutenants to be solely selected, without any exception, from the Nobility, a privilege also abolished in 1830, thus destroying the connecting link between the Government and the lower orders.

Moreover, the precedence granted to the Nobility above all other classes, by the enactments of Grand Masters Despuig and de Rohan, dated respectively 16th September, 1733, and 17th March, 1795, clearly prove, if further proof were necessary, that the patriciate has always been considered as a distinct class or Body.

Besides, through custom the nobles were allowed certain distinctions which were not extended to the other classes.

(*) By a Proclamation dated 5th June, 1815.

Thus we find in a public contract dated 23rd July, 1588, that, it was (*) usual and customary, for many and many years past, that the nobles should spend in the funerals of every member of their body, be he a Baron, or *Capitano di Verga* or of other dignity, for wax, *coccia*, masses &c. from thirty to forty ounces or thereabouts, as was the case on the death of the Eminent Marco Ingnanez, Baron of three fiefs, one of the most noble of this city, who had passed through all its highest dignities, and of the Worshipful Captain Giuseppe de Nava, also most noble, both belonging to ancient and noble houses, and exceedingly rich and noble *ex utroque latere*. The said Nava possessed fiefs and plantations, &c. &c. Another of the many customs was to cover the vault wherein nobles were interred with a rich black velvet carpet, which in very many cases was kept there for years and years.

As in a letter lately addressed to the *Times* it was stated that the nobles have ever taken a prominent part in the various political crisis through which Malta had to pass, and many have distinguished themselves on the field of battle, by founding institutions of public beneficence, in literature and in other ways, it will not be amiss to mention *en passant* some of the most note-worthy, premising, however, that out of 133 Maltese who up to 1740 had distinguished themselves, all mentioned in *Zammit's Elogia Illustrium Melitensium*, we find no less than 36 members of the patriciate, and that the writer of these remarks thinks proper to omit the list of Governors of these Islands, of the Jurats and of those who were admitted into the various orders of knighthood, including that of St. John, on account of its being too long, and thus inadmissible in so short a sketch as the present. *Ad rem*.

Amongst the Vice Roys and ambassadors, we find that John Baptist Platamone, was, owing to his uncommon ability, appointed Vice Roy of Sicily in 1121; that Ludovico Plata-

(*) Translated from the original.

mone represented the Order as Ambassador in Sicily in 1591; and that Ignatius Bonnici occupied the same post in 1651, and a Marquis Testaferrata in 1714, in the Court of Spain.

In 1373 Margaret of Aragon built and endowed the Monastery of Carmine at Notabile. The noble Olivier, in 1581, founded the Convent of St. Catherine in Valletta. Catherine Vitale established the *Monte di Pietà* and amongst other property bequeathed the palace of Selmone and surrounding estate. The Baroness Diana Testaferrata Inguanez left a considerable fund, the interest of which is to be annually distributed amongst the poor—and the Rev. Giuseppe Marco Azopardi bequeathed the whole of his property to the Saura Hospital at Notabile.

Amongst the prominent leaders of the revolt against the French in 1798, figured the Marquis De Piro, Counts Manduca and Teuma, Chev. Paolo Parisio, and Barons Fournier and Bonnici. The leader of the Deputation that waited, in 1802, on His Majesty George III, requesting that Malta should be annexed to the British Empire, was the Marchese Mario Testaferrata. And in 1812 the Marchese Nicolò Testaferrata took such an interest in the welfare of his country as to remain for a long time in London, and ultimately succeeded in causing the appointment of a commission of enquiry composed of Sir Hildebrand Oakes, and Messrs. William A'Court and John Burrows. In 1837 we again find at the head of a movement for a general reform and the granting of a free press the Noble Camillo dei Baroni Sceberras, assisted by Count Gatto and Marquis Lorenzo A. Testaferrata, on which occasion the Nobility appointed a Committee and sent two deputies to the general Maltese Giunta.

If we look to the art of war a long roll presents itself also. Can any one deny the valour of a Tommeo Cassia, of a Matteo Abela, of a Bartolomeo and a Giuliano Abela, the rare courage of a Basilico, elected Prince of Wallachia, of a Giacomo Bonnici, who distinguished himself so much in the

siege of 1565 as to merit the appellation of the Maltese Hercules; the uncommon bravery of a Count Ignazio Francesco Wzzini Paleologo, and latterly the no less distinguished General Michele dei Baroni Seeberras Testaferrata, who for a while held one of the portfolios in Bavaria, the courage of a Marchese Filippo Testaferrata, Capt. in the Royal Regiment of Malta, and that of the no less distinguished Capt. Rinaldo dei Baroni Seeberras of the 80th. Regiment, who died fighting in the late Indian mutiny; can any one, I repeat, deny their valour, courage and bravery? Most decidedly *no*.

In the Church many a noble merited to be elevated to its highest dignities. At the head of these must justly be placed the pious Cardinal Fabrizio Seeberras Testaferrata, Bishop of Sinigaglia, who received the hat from his Holiness Pius VII. on the 8th. March, 1816. It is impossible to mention the others chronologically, but it matters little when they flourished, the object of the writer being that of proving that the Maltese Nobility has, at all times, been the nursery of distinguished men.

Monsignor Leonardo Abela, Bishop of Sidonia and Apostolic Nuncio in the East, is well known to have been the Cardinal Mezzofanti of his epoch.

Fra Michele Olivier of the Order of St. John; Fra Pietro Xara, O. P.; Father Girolamo Manduca; Monsignor Alberto de Nasis, Bishop of Nicopoli; Canon Giuseppe Manduca; Archdeacon Faustinus Xara; Father Francesco Piscopo, O.P.; F. Camillo Cassia, O. P.; F. Luigi M. Wzzini Paleologo, S. J.; Monsignor Domenico Seeberras, Bishop of Epiphania; Monsignor Baldassare Damico; Archdeacon Lorenzo Ubaldesco De Piro; Canon Alessandro Bologna; Monsignor Pier Giacomo Testaferrata, Governor of Città di Castello and Legate of Ravenna; and last, but not least, Monsignor Sant, Archbishop of Rhodes and Bishop of Malta, are a few of those who rendered themselves noteworthy in this branch.

In the Bar the primates are undoubtedly Gio. Batta Platamone, Baron Ascanio Surdo, Ignazio Bonnici, Carl' Alessio Pisani and Gregorio Bonnici.

Nor have the nobles been backward in the republic of letters. Not to mount to any very remote period, the Commendatore Gio. Francesco Abela, author of *Malta Illustrata*; Baron Ascanio Surdo, and F. Faustinus Xara are found to have flourished in the XVII century. Baron Gaetano Pisani, Count Paleologo, Baron Calcedonio Azopardi, Marquis Carl'Antonio Barbaro, Count Gio. Antonio Ciantar, Canon Giuseppe Giacomo Testaferrata and the Marquis Giuseppe Testaferrata Viani in the XVIIIth. And the XIXth. has not been less productive, for amongst those who are no more, (*) Marquis Gioacchino Barbaro, Baron Vincenzo Azopardi, C.M.G., LL. D., and the no less distinguished Baron Giuseppe M. De Piro, G.C.M.G., have merited the applause of the learned, but more especially of their fellow countrymen.

Whether the local authorities are justified in slighting, without any reason whatever, so respectable a body, by violating its ancient privileges, is a question which the writer leaves to the intelligent portion of the public to decide.

Malta, October, 1876.

M. C. D.

(*) The writer has made it a point not to mention any person living.

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