

# THE GOLD HOARD OF 1525

by

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To make a lucky strike of real gold was the one sure way by which an inhabitant of Malta could enrich himself suddenly in the humdrum, largely agricultural, life he endured during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries — short, that is, of a lucky marriage or of a valuable prize brought in by the local corsairs (1). In the complete absence of native gold ores, a steady supply of hidden treasure, of gold coins and medals in particular, concealed in fields, gardens, yards or wall crevices, was ensured by the very tangled history of the Maltese islands in the Middle Ages. Most of it must have belonged to previous inhabitants who had been, or were about to be, overwhelmed by invaders with an alien culture or religion: Christians succumbing to Muslim pressure in the ninth century (to ignore earlier possibilities involving Vandals, etc., about whose operations in the area less, if possible, is known), Muslims being progressively squeezed out in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (if, that is, they refused to embrace Christianity) (2), and Jews driven out by royal decree in 1492 (unless they accepted the status of *conversos*). No doubt some must have belonged to owners who merely feared the ravages of common robbers, owners who were struck down by sudden death, incapacitating illness or remote captivity, who were thus prevented from revealing to their heirs where they had hidden their wealth. Later generations in Malta as in Sicily, whose history in this respect is not at all dissimilar, learned to search for this hidden gold and silver; interest was widespread and rumour frequently active (3).

In his instructions of 10 June 1440 to Andreas de Ravello, then on his way to Malta on a mission of inquiry, Viceroy Baptista de Platha-

1. After all, the parents of well-endowed maidens tended to expect their future sons-in-law to be themselves swimming in wealth, and the proceeds of corsairing ventures were shared out in strict proportion to the relative size of one's financial participation.
2. The exiling to Sicily of 'Abd ar Rahman ibn Ramadan by King Roger the Norman represents an early phase in the Christians' treatment of the Muslim inhabitants of Malta: M. Amari, *Bibliotheca Arabo-Sicula*, 1881, II, p. 433. The exiling of all the Muslims remaining in Malta by Emperor Frederick in the thirteenth century represents its final consummation: *ibid.*, p. 213.
3. C. Trasselli, '“Tesori” e falsa moneta da Ferdinando I a Giovanni', in *Note per la Storia dei banchi in Sicilia nel XV secolo: Parte I, Zecche e monete*, pp. 53-54, 55. Trasselli writes of treasures of coins of 'Sancta Elena' found in Sicily at Racalburo around 1460-61 and at Caltagirone in 1493. Licences for the search of treasures were issued in Sicily in 1413, 1433 and 1435.

mone wrote among other things: 'As His Royal Majesty is informed and has written to us lately that some inhabitants of the said islands, digging in several places of the said islands without any licence from the royal court, have found a large amount of treasure, that you wi'll diligently examine and force them with all necessary means to reveal their finds' (4). Some twenty years later a hoard of 248 Byzantine gold coins was discovered in Malta, 102 of them weighing as much as *carlino*, one that weighed half that amount, and 145 *dila stampa pichula tunda* (5). The discovery was made by five little children whose fathers all seem to have lived at Naxxar, but the fields of the inhabitants of that village could lie as far as Gha'lis in one direction and Swieqi and St. George's in the other (6).

The records of the thorough investigation into the find made on behalf of the royal government have not survived, but the minutes of the town council for March and April 1461 reveal much apprehension among the members (7). It was suggested that the lawyer Nicolaus Penna should restrict his enquiry to recent allegations only, ignoring previous ones because persons 'had been and were defamed of old owing to their riches' (8). In 1474 the Jewish doctor Abram Safaradi underwent similar investigations with other persons, leaving his patients in Malta without a doctor while he defended himself at Palermo (9). In 1475 the town authorities insisted that informers' names should 'ways be revealed in investigations 'even about the discovery of treasure' (10).

4. 'Nec minus cum Regia Maiestas extiterit Informatata et Jta per suas licteras nuper scripsit quod non nullj dictarum Jnsolarum serio nulla obtenta licencia a Regia Curia Jn nonnullis locis ipsarum Jnsolarum effodentes magnam Thesaurj copiam reppererunt Jllos diligenter examinetis et oportunis remedijs coherceatis ad illam manifestandam.': S[tate] A[rchives at] P[alermo], Lettere viceregie, v. 14, ff. 118v — 119; cf. H. Besc, 'The Secrezia and the Royal Patrimony in Malta: 1240-1450', in *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed A.T. Luttrell, p. 136.
5. '.....videlicet pezi dujchentu quaranta octu d; la stampa di Sanctu Constantinu et Santa Lena aluna partj et alaltra partj chi esti lu munti cum Vna cruchi scilicet chentu et trj pezi dila stampa predicta grandi quantu Vnu carlinu d; pisu di tarj septi et grani dechi pro quolibet parum plus uel minus li quali tucti li dictj chentu et trj pisatj foru marcu Vnu Vncie septj et trj octauj Jnfra li qualj chindi esti Vnu kj pisa per mitatj. Et chentu quaranta sey [sic] pezi di la stampa pichula tunda di Valurj per chasquidunu di tarj septi et grani dechi, li qualj tucti cxxxxv pisatj foru markj duj sej Vncie et septi octauj, et sic foru in Vniuerso markj quatu sey Vnce et Vna quarta.': SAP, Lettere viceregie, v. 79, f.1v; cf. Besc, loc. cit.
6. Names are given in Besc, loc. cit. Rogerius Gauduzi was at Naxxar in ca. 1450: N[ational] L[ibrary of] M[alta], Univ. 11, f. 78; the angara list of ca. 1483 shows Danza Scembri and Ximun Sant at Naxxar with all the Xerri men except one, who lived at Musta: Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Università, Quadernj diversi n.7.
7. NLM, Univ. 11, ff. 109v - 118v.
8. *Ibid.*, ff. 109v et seq.
9. G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta at the end of the Middle Ages* in the press.
10. Cath. Mus., Mdina, Università A. Ms. 34, f. 237v.

It had been known for some time that the goldsmith Johannes Scarpa was involved in 1526 in a lawsuit concerning the discovery of yet another gold hoard (11), but it is only recently that it has become possible to reach a better appreciation of its various ramifications. No one seems to have noticed that in 1525 notary Laurencius Hagijs referred to the recent discovery of gold coins in three of his surviving deeds (12). These reveal that among those accused of retaining substantial portions of *monete Heleniane* were the Dominican friar Andreas de Gaudisio or Gauci, the lawyer and judge Gregorio Xerri who obtained 350 of the coins *Impressionis Sancte Helene* discovered by the brothers Antonius and Jaimus Gauci, and the Friar Minor Paulus de Zikendo seu de Frendo who received one rotolo and two uncie of gold bars made out of other coins of the hoard (13). There could no longer be any doubt that the discovery made in or about 1525 was a substantial one.

The recent opening of the episcopal archives at Mdina (14) has led to the finding and study of a substantial quantity of papers of the proceedings in the bishop's court for the recovery of an alleged loan of 101 ducats instituted by Julius Casha against the goldsmith Johannes Scarpa (15). The latter claimed that the ducats had been paid to him for a similar number of Byzantine coins which he had given to Casha and which the latter had been forced to surrender to the king's officials in Malta (16). The records of the case shed much light on the social background of the whole episode, and do not fail to provide some further valuable details concerning the hoard itself. It is clear now that the original discoverers were the sons of Jaimo Gauci and Dimitri Portelli (17), the latter of whom is known with certainty to have lived at Naxxar (18). From other evidence it is known that Friar Andreas Gauci of

11. A.T. Luttrell, *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, p. 11; R. Valentini, in *Archivum Melitense*, v. ix, p. 175.
12. Deeds dated 13 and 15 April and 11 August 1525: N[otarial] A[rchives of] V[alletta], R 7, ff. 19r-v, 19v et seq, 59r-v.
13. The calendar of the deed of the 11 August 1525 in NLM, Libr. Ms. 704 A, f. 411v, is wrong in giving the weight of 1 rotolo 2 oncie as that of 50 Byzantine coins; the original does not give the number of coins that went to make up that weight of gold.
14. G. Wettinger, 'Our Medieval Historical Archives and their Care', *Maltese History: What Future?*, ed. A. Williams, and R. Vella Bonavita, pp. 99-100. J. Azzopardi, *Handlist of the Episcopal and Pro-Vicarial Archives at the Malta Cathedral Museum*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1975.
15. Cath. Mus., Mdina, Curia Episcopalis Melitensis, Acta Originalia, v. 8 B, ff. 504-91 (hereafter referred to as *Proc.*).
16. *Proc.*, f. 521.
17. *Ib.*, f. 534r-v.
18. Cath. Mus., Mdina, Cathedral Archives, Prebende v. 5 'Libro di decime decanali 1536-38', f. 16.

the Dominicans, who received a portion of the treasure, also originated from that village, where in later years he was allowed to reside, staying in his parents' home while he acted as parish curate (19). It is possible that the brothers Jaimus and Antonius Gauci also lived at Naxxar but direct evidence is lacking. It is therefore on the whole probable that the money was found in the same general area of Malta as that of 1459-60, though it is hardly likely to have been on the same spot or close to it. Dimitri Porte'li is known to have owned fields both at Maghtab and at Ta' Dnieri in the district of Buhagiar for which he paid tithes to the cathedral archdeacon (20), and at Santu Giorgi at Beyn Guirrad, perhaps San Gorg tal-Qadi, for which he paid tithes to the dean (21).

The treasure amounted to some 1,300 gold coins (22) invariably referred to as *moneta di sancta Helena* or *dila impronta di sancta Helena* (23). The gold obtained from some 100 coins (27 of which were not melted down) weighed 16 oncie 14 pisi (24). If the coins were all roughly similar in weight then the whole treasure must have contained about 13 English pounds' weight of gold, making it just about half the size of the hoard of Muslim coins discovered in 1698 at Mdina (25). In 1525 the discovery of the hoard seems to have caused an immediate flurry of interest in ever widening circles, which soon led to the secreto's intervention and the arrest of all concerned. The king, then as before, claimed the whole treasure for himself, presumably because its discovery had not been reported.

Julius Casha seems to have certainly obtained 100 Byzantine coins in return for that number of ducats. Witnesses said he wanted more. Antoni Gauci, the uncle of one of the lads or children who found the coins said that, before the government got wind of the discovery, Casha had asked him to sell some of the old coins directly to him, warning him that Scarpa the goldsmith would defraud him by paying in false ducats and claiming that he had himself been cheated of 25 ducats (26). He told him that he had himself paid Scarpa the 100 ducats which the goldsmith had given to the witness, but the latter refused to accompany

19. NLM, Archives of the Order of St. John in Malta, v.416, f.218r-v. Fr. M Fsadni O.P. has kindly provided this reference and background information.
20. Cath. Mus., Mdina, Cath. Arch., Prebende v. 3 'Quinternus Decime..... Archidiaconatus', f. 18.
21. Cath. Mus., Mdina, Cath., Arch., Preb. v.5, f.16.
22. Proc., ff. 507v.
23. Proc., *passim*.
24. Proc., f. 580.
25. Below, p. 33
26. Proc., f. 534. Friar Jorlandus Farcacheni of the Dominicans said that he had been shown two ducats which had been made by Scarpa out of gold from the Byzantine coins: *ib.*, f. 538.

Casha to his house to see the Byzantine coins which Casha had already obtained from the goldsmith. Friar Francisco Gauci, another Dominican, had told the witness that Casha had shown him 400 pieces of the money of St. Helena partly melted down into ingots and partly still in coin. Franquinus de Alligricto claimed that Casha to'd him that the goldsmith had at first taken 500 coins to him which they counted behind closed doors in the house of Luca Xullise his cousin (27). It was also said that the Reverend Don Antonius Cassar gave 200 ducats to the goldsmith in order to obtain that same number of Byzantine coins. With that information and what is known of Zikendo seu Frendo and of Gregorius Xerri the judge, there is no doubt, therefore, that the 1,300 coins were very much in demand in spite of the law requiring all such treasure trove to be surrendered to the royal officials if its discovery had not been duly reported and if it was the result of unauthorized digging. When the discovery became public knowledge the two Gauci brothers, the father and uncle of one of the lads who came across the hoard, together with all who were believed to have retained any portion of it, were summoned to Palermo to answer charges (28). The judge Gregorius Xerri, one of the accused, was able to obtain forgiveness for all if the coins or their gold content were given up completely to the royal officials (29).

The goldsmith Johannes Scarpa had, in the meantime, gone into hiding (30), apparently because he could not return all the money traced to him which he had already passed on to such men as Casha who denied any connection with it. Casha apparently was afraid that not only would his portion of the hoard money be confiscated but so would other property he possessed (31). He went to Gozo as soon as rumours about him began to circulate, though he later denied that his trip to Gozo had anything to do with the money (32). The Captain-at-arms waited at Mellieha for his return and was able eventually to apprehend him, taking possession of some 400 ducats found on him. Casha appealed successfully to the authorities at Palermo for the return of the money; even then, apparently, he was made to feel that he should lend the sum of 60 *aurei* to the town authorities of Malta.

It must have been in connection with the whole affair that Casha also paid a visit to Palermo. There, at the house of the Friars Minor, he met Franquinus de Alligricto, who was trying to settle the affairs of

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27. Proc., f. 537v.

28. *Ib.*, f. 529v, 534v.

29. *Ib.*, ff. 510v, 529v.

30. *Ib.*, ff. 528v, 536v.

31. *Ib.*, f. 538v.

32. *Ib.*, f. 576r-v.

Scarpa the goldsmith on behalf of his niece who was Scarpa's wife (33). Casha refused to authorize his nephew Antonius Calus to hand over the money to the government because he insisted that only he in person could retrieve it from the most secret place in which it was hidden. He later denied outright that he had said anything of the sort and, indeed, so many statements by both sides are regularly and completely denied by the other that it is hazardous to reach firm conclusions on many aspects of the case. On one occasion, Scarpa alleged that Casha had declared before several persons that he kept the gold buried below ground, *amuchata sucta terra* (34). On another, Scarpa said that Casha had entrusted it to some religious persons (ie. priests or friars), *amuchata et recomandata penes religiosas personas* (35), while Casha himself continued to the end in court to deny all connection with the Byzantine coins (36).

Scarpa the goldsmith insisted just as firmly that Casha not only paid for the 100 old coins by giving him that number of current ducats but had actually eventually arranged, after his repeated pleas for the return of the hoard money and its final surrender to the royal officials, for friar Franciscus Gauci, another Dominican, to hand it over himself without revealing Casha's part in the matter (37). This was duly done on the 9 September 1525 in the presence of the town mayor or captain-of-the-rod, of the captain-at-arms, of Johannes Calava then in charge of the *secrezia*, as well as of Casha, Scarpa, and others (38). Scarpa identified the coins and the gold as the ones in question, but he alleged that two coins were missing. He now claimed that at this point Casha intervened, suggesting that if Scarpa took an oath about the missing money he would be prepared himself to add two coins to the ones handed in by the friar, thus confessing to his connection with the money. As usual, however, Casha denied it all.

Casha in fact continued to insist that he had merely lent the ducats to Scarpa as 'friend to friend' without any gain and certainly not in payment for the Byzantine coins (39). Scarpa argued that Casha was *homo scarsu*, stingy and avaricious, who was not at all likely to lend such a large sum of money to someone like himself unrelated to him by

33. *Ib.*, ff. 528v, 556.

34. *Ib.*, f. 524v.

35. *Ib.*, f. 564v.

36. Thus Proc., ff. 526, 564-65.

37. *Ib.*, and ff. 506, 537.

38. *Ib.*, f. 580. Cf. *ib.*, ff. 506v-508, 512-513v, 524r-v, etc.

39. *Ib.*, ff. 510-511. A similar accusation of Casha against Scarpa had been made in the *Curia Capitanei*, and Scarpa was also interrogated by that court: *ibid.*, ff. 582-583, 584r-v.

blood or marriage (40). Casha, however, replied that he was a very rich person in fortune and income, accustomed to lend money to sundry individuals (41). Scarpa retorted that he had heard that Casha had become rich by the practice of usury (42). Anyhow, if Casha ever did any favour to anyone it was always by written agreement and with good surety. Casha then said that he and Scarpa were *compatres* and it was therefore to be expected that he should lend him money as to a friend. Scarpa retorted that he was not acting like one, seeing that he was asking for the return of what he had never lent out.

Witnesses were produced by Casha to testify to his character and quality (43). They included the Reverend Don Dominicus Dimech, treasurer of the cathedral, the noble Petrus Axac, the Venerable Don Jacobus Vassallo, Johannes Calava of the *Secrezia*, and ten other persons, including landowners like Simon Cumbu, craftsmen like Franciscus Chilia, and the friar Johannes Tard (ie. Attard). In general, they all agreed that he was a very rich man, Dimech pointing out that he was in consequence charged with the duty of keeping a horse for cavalry service. They all said that he frequently lent out money without insisting on profit or security. Dimech had himself frequently borrowed small sums of two or three ducats in this way, and once the sum of eight onze as from friend to friend without gain but with security. Calava, one of the chief citizens of Malta, had once asked for the loan of ten onze: Casha pushed a bag of coins towards him, asking him to help himself — which he did, counting out the sum of ten onze in *aquile*. Antoni Gallu was offered the loan of 100 or 50 ducats by Casha for the ransom of his brother-in-law; the suggestion was accepted but the money was never needed after all, and he did not take it. Chilia said that he had borrowed sometimes ten, sometimes eight, ducats from Casha without security or interest, and Friar Johannes Tard said that Casha had lent him thirty ducats without gain or written documentation as from friend to friend. But two days later Franquinus de A ligricto stated in court that Casha was stingy and not the sort of person who threw away his belongings; he would not lend out such a large sum of ducats without security (44).

That Casha had lent money on the occasion mentioned by the witnesses need not be doubted, but that he lent 101 ducats to Scarpa in two payments of 46 and 55 ducats respectively cannot be believed. The evidence that Scarpa had given him some 100 Byzantine coins in money

40. *Ib.*, ff. 566.

41. *Ib.*, f. 561v.

42. *Ib.*, 43. *Ib.*, ff. 562-563v.

43. *Ib.*, ff. 562-563v.

44. *Ib.*, f. 566. 45. *Ib.*, f. 534v.

or their gold content is overwhelming, and it is not to be expected that he would have done so without payment. It would in fact seem that Scarpa was merely taking cunning advantage of Casha's embarrassment, of his fear that his property would be confiscated if his unauthorized retention of a portion of the treasure were once admitted. Possibly, having once denied it under oath he would now be laying himself open to the additional charge of perjury. Scarpa could freely and safely deny under oath that he had been *lent* the money by Casha. Undoubtedly there was an element of spite on Scarpa's part, seeing that Casha had tried to cut him out of his commission by endeavouring to obtain the coins directly from the Gauci brothers. It has also to be remembered that Scarpa had paid the Gauci brothers for the 100 coins which he gave Casha (45) and he would now presumably have to recover that money from them, a task which must have presented its own problems. He would also have to pay 200 ducats to Don Antonius Cassar. Unfortunately the last two pages of the proceedings are missing and it is impossible to tell how the matter rested in the end.

One must think that every time it was rumoured that *monete sancte Helene* had been discovered there was the same sort of rush of 'gold-seekers', the finders of such treasure laying themselves open, one suspects, to the depredations of their more powerful and frequently more astute neighbours because they put themselves beyond the protection of the law by not reporting their finds. Inevitably the *secreto* would soon get wind of what was afoot and spoil their game by arresting and sending them all off to Palermo to answer charges. Panic would seize everyone involved. Suspicion would fall also on the innocent, especially on any whose wealth could not be explained at all satisfactorily. A few highly compromised individuals might even take to flight or go into hiding, leaving their relatives to settle their affairs and make their peace with the royal court as best they might before they returned to 'the noiseless tenor of their way'.

But still the 'gold fever' struck, again and again. Within months of the arrival in Malta of the Order of St. John and of the ending of the proceedings against Scarpa, Luca Darmania and Antonio Callus formed a partnership and obtained a joint licence from the Order to look for old treasures of gold and silver hidden away in Malta and Gozo, agreeing to give the Order a third of any treasure they found (46). Callus was the same nephew of Casha who is repeatedly mentioned in the proceedings and who made several personal appearances in court on behalf of

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45. *Ib.*, f. 534v.

46. NLM, AOM 414, f. 285v, licence dated 14 December 1530.

his uncle (47). Seven years later, his brother Joseph, a doctor, obtained another licence in his own name to search for treasure, agreeing not only to give the Order a third of any treasure recovered but also to repair any damage which his excavations caused to private property (48). Ten months previously, Petrus Calava obtained another licence to search for 'old treasures' on his own property and that of his father as well as elsewhere (49). He was the son of Johannes Calavà, the *secreto* who participated in the arrest of all who were involved in the unauthorized retention of *moneta Heleniane* in 1525 (50). Fifty or so years later still, a similar request for a licence to search for hidden treasure was granted (51), and as late as 1698 the biggest treasure of all was found accidentally at Mdina, some 14.5 rotolos *di moneta e medaglie di Sant' Elena*, of various degrees of fineness, practically all of which coins, if not all, seem to have come from Muslim not Byzantine mints! (52)

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47. Proc., f. 530.

48. NLM, AOM 416, f. 220v, licence dated 27 August 1537. It was in the house of Joseph Callus that Scarpa and Casha had a meeting with each other in which the former insisted that the latter should surrender his portion of the Byzantine Coins: Proc., f. 537.

49. *Ib.*, licence dated 13 October 1536.

50. 'Matrimonio di Pietro Calava, figlio di Giovanni e di Gioanna Caxaro giugales', 8 March 1533: NLM, Libr. Ms. 1365, p. 233.

51. NLM, AOM 440, f. 252, licence dated 20 March 1582 granted to the two partners Gaspar Membron and Antonucci Bonello.

52. A proper study of the subject of Maltese hoard money from the archaeological and numismatic points-of-view has long been overdue. Dr. A.T. Luttrell informs me that such a study is now in progress — which will, one trusts, among other matters decide more closely the date of the hoard found in 1698 from the few scraps of information that still survive. To the untutored mind the descriptions given by G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, v. 1, pp. 692-93, with his *Alì appoggiato in Dio, ci raccoglie e ci consegna a Dio* and other invocations of Alì found on the coins, if genuine, would seem to place the coins of that hoard firmly within Fatimid times. The great rarity of gold Byzantine coins in our modern museums, in spite of the richness of at least some of the hoards that were discovered, should not occasion any surprise. Gold always tends to be re-used. Byzantine or Arabic gold coins were invariably melted down soon after discovery, partly also to destroy the evidence of their existence, as will be seen by the events of 1525. Any coins surviving were, before 1530, despatched to Sicily by the royal officials. In 1698 only a few coins were preserved as specimens to be given away as gifts.