

Sibilla D'Aragona and the Foundation of the Saqqajja Benefice on Gozo

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It is well-known that the benefice of the Annunciation of the Virgin, also known as Tas-Saqqajja, on Gozo was founded by Sibilla d'Aragona. Achille Ferres, without quoting any sources as is his wont, asserts that the year of foundation was 1347 *come apparisce per una provisione di Re Martino* [1392-1405]. He rightly notes that on 12 November 1372 the benefice was granted to Don Bartholomeo Axac after it had become vacant by the death of its last incumbent, Don Pietro de Barba.¹ This document can, in fact, be found in the sixth register of the Royal Chancery at Palermo² and has been published by Bresc.³ This register carries on its cover the year 1347 which fact probably induced Ferres and others to attribute this and many other not readily datable documents in it to that year.⁴ Ferres was also aware of the document of 11 November of Indiction XII [=1373] but ignores the fact stated in the document that the induction of Axac to the benefice was entrusted to Frater Nicholaus de Panormo, alias Papalla.⁵ He is also aware of the concession, on 15 October 1398, of the benefice made to the priest Rogerius Saguna at his own request wherein it is clearly stated that the benefice had been *fundatum olim per quondam Sibiliam de Aragonia et dotatum per eamdem sub jure patronatus propter eius Sibilie mortem absque legitima herede vacat ad presens in manibus nostre curie cui Sibilie in dicto beneficio ipsa nostra curia successit*.⁶ Although Ferres calls Saguna a Maltese priest, he was in fact *de Insoia Gaudisii*.⁷ It must also be noted, finally, that Ferres also refers to another document issued at Palermo on 10 December 1472 whereby the Viceroy Lop Ximen D'Urrea grants this same benefice to the cleric Geronimo Farahone (not Tabone, as in Ferres).

From the exposition of his material it is clear that Ferres was utilizing reliable but secondary sources and a close perusal should convince the reader that this secondary

1. A. Ferres, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, Malta 1866, facsimile edition: Midsea, Malta 1985, 561-2.
2. Archivio di Stato, Palermo [=ASP], Real Cancelleria [=RC] 6, f. 190^v.
3. H. Bresc, 'Documents on Frederick IV of Sicily's intervention in Malta: 1372', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, xxviii (1973) 192, Doc. VIII.
4. Thus, for example, the collation of the rectorship of the *Hospitale S. Francisci* at Rabat, Malta, to Frater Nicolaus Papalla, has for the same reason been given that date in the past; cf. correspondence in October 1995 in *The Sunday Times* (Malta) 8th, p. 17; 22nd, p. 18, 29th, p. 18 etc.
5. This document is being published in S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Pt. II: Documents at the State Archives, Palermo, No. 1: Real Cancelleria (1259-1400)*, University of Malta Publications, Malta 1999, Doc. 95.
6. *Ibid.*, Doc. 248.
7. *Ibid.*, Doc. 269 (25.v.1399).

source was none other than the *Beneficia Ecclesiastica* compiled by Giovan Luca Barberi in 1511.⁸ Another author that makes reference to this benefice is De Soldanis who, given the importance of this *juspatronatus* in Gozitan ecclesiastical history, is surprisingly sketchy in his treatment, uncritically repeats the year 1347 and omits all other pre-1500 references to it.⁹ Gian Francesco Abela is more adventurous. He advances two hypotheses as to the identity of Sibilla d' Aragona. The first would have it that Sibilla and Margarita d' Aragona (wife of Giacomo Pellegrino and whose will of June 1418 eventually benefitted the Carmelites) were sisters and daughters of Frederick IV's natural son Guglielmo. His preferred theory, however, was that they were both descendants of one or other of the several natural offspring of Frederick III of Sicily (1272-1377) born both before his marriage to Eleanor and, *quod turpius est*, exclaims Francesco Testa Archbishop of Monreale,¹⁰ also after his marriage. Abela also notes that one of Frederick III's paramours also happened to be called Sibilla and that she bore him a daughter.¹¹

Had Ferres looked at the originals of the documents he was quoting and not relied on Barberi whose motivation in publishing them was entirely different, he would have read in the concession of November 1472 that Sibilla was none other than:

*Madonna Sibilla de Ulmella amasia di quondam re Fridericu.*¹²

This means that the two Sibillas of Abela's preferred hypothesis were but one and the same person, the lover of Frederick III of Sicily.

The specific mention of Sibilla's real surname, Ulmella, and not d' Aragona which must have been an appellative acquired through her close association with the monarch, opens up new avenues of approach to the matter, provoking further investigation into her identity and consequent placing the date of foundation of the benefice on firmer ground. The seventeenth-century publication by Mugnos yields an interesting variant of Sibilla's surname: Sormella.¹³ Both Mugnos and the Chancery scribe registering the 1472 concession were doubtlessly copying the surname, with which they could not have been very familiar, from an earlier document so that it is only reasonable to expect from them nothing more than an approximate reproduction, subject to palaeographic errors, of some form related to both. The surname Solimella immediately springs to mind. Admittedly, the absence of an initial S (in the Chancery

8. Published by Illuminato Peri in 1962 (cf. p. 190).

9. Published in translation by Dun Ġużepp Farrugia as *Ghawdex bil-Ġrajja Tiegħu*, Stamperija tal-Gvern, Malta 1953 (cf. p. 53).

10. F. Testa, *De Vita et Rebus Gestis Federici Secundi Siciliae Regis*, Palermo 1775, 139.

11. G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta isola nel mare Siciliano*, Bonacota, Malta 1647, 449-50.

12. ASP RC 128, f. 73 (18.xi.1472).

13. F. Mugnos, *Teatro Genologico delle Famiglie del Regno di Sicilia*, Coppola, Palermo 1647-1670; facsimile edition Forni, Bologna 1988, vol. i, p. 75.

version) presents difficulties of reconciliation with Mugnos' form and the suggested Solimella. Serendipity, however, played its part when, rummaging recently in the *Biblioteca Vaticana*, the rare surname (de) Solmella was encountered in an index which referred the reader to its more usual form (de) Olivella, occurring both as surname and as toponym, the town of that name in Tarragona, Catalunya.¹⁴ Another volume of the same series published by the *Bibliothèques des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome [=BEFAR]* yielded the additional information that the Spanish personal name Sibilla or Sibilina was merely the name of the town of Seville – Sivilla or Sivigla –¹⁵ in keeping with the common enough medieval practice of calling women after countries and cities.¹⁶ It is clear that Ulmella or Olmella is a misreading of Olivella where the three downward strokes of the third and fourth characters were mistaken for the equal number of strokes in the letter -m-. On the other hand, the transfer between the two liquid consonants -r- and -l- (Sormella Solmella) is a readily explained linguistic phenomenon.

Things now begin to fall into place permitting a more precise dating of the foundation and family connexions suggesting themselves. Frederick III was born in 1272 and he married the beautiful Eleanor, daughter of Charles II of Anjou in 1302.¹⁷ His affair with Sibilla, which preceded his marriage, produced a daughter called Ysabella who, in 1304, was wanted as a bride for Rogerono (or Rogerò) son of the famous Ruggiero Lauria (the admiral who had won the decisive battle for Aragon against the Angevins in Malta's harbour on 8 July 1283)¹⁸; Rogerò's mother was Margarita Lancia, the sister of Corrado Lancia,¹⁹ and of Manfredi Lancia (who, as Vice-Admiral of Ruggiero Lauria, finally took Malta's *Castrum Maris*).²⁰ Papal dispensation for this marriage was needed, requested and granted on 23 January 1304,

14. BEFAR (J.-M. Vidal), *Benoît XII (1334-1342): Lettres Communes*, (Fontemoing, Paris 1903-11), vol. i, Index of Names.

15. BEFAR, *Les Registres de Martin IV (1281-1285)*, (Fontemoing, Paris 1901) 219 # 479.

16. To mention a few examples, *Venecia filia quondam Johannis Petroni militis* (ASP Prot. 2, f. 267 (19.xi.1354)). *Francia de Alayno* (S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Pt. I: Notarial Documents, No. 2: Notary Giacomo Zabbara (1495-1497)*, University of Malta Publications, Malta 1999, Doc. 304). *Granata Fenek* (*Ibid.*, Doc. 191). *Sicilia Forti* (*Ibid.*, Doc. 284). *Ginevra mulier uxoris Anthonii de Pactis* (Lagumina, I, Doc. CCLXXVI = ASP RC 52, f. 99 (5.ii.[1417])).

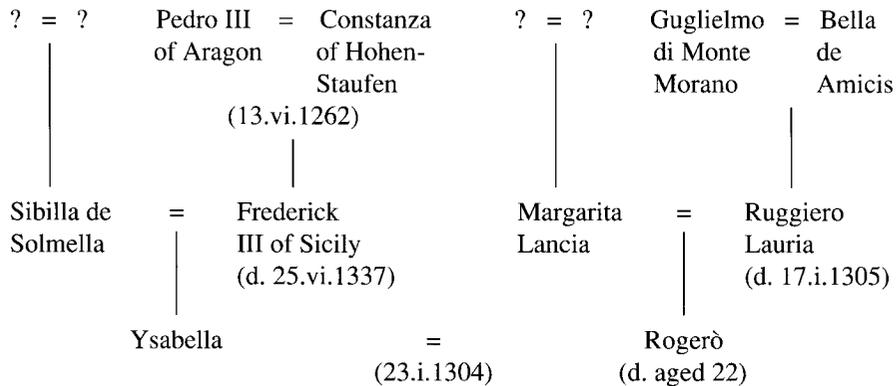
17. On Frederick III, A. De Stefano, *Federico III d'Aragona re di Sicilia (1296-1337)*, (Zanichelli, Bologna 1956). Testa, *op. cit.*

18. R. Muntaner (& B. D'Esclot), *Cronache Catalane*, Sellerio, Palermo 1984, pp. 100-3 # 83.

19. E. Haberkern, *Der Kampf um Sizilien in den Jahren 1302-1337*, Rothschild, Berlin-Leipzig 1921, p. 170 n. 11.

20. Muntaner, p. 118 # 93. J. Zurita (*Anales de Aragón*, Zaragoza 1970, vol. ii, p. 161) confusedly gives Manfredi's name as Corrado. Manfredi was appointed Captain and Justiciar of Malta (G. Silvestri, *De Rebus Regni Siciliae: 9 Settembre 1282-26 Agosto 1283*, Palermo 1882, pp. 611-2 Doc. DCLXXVIII (12.iv.1283)).

because the bride and groom were related at the fourth degree of consanguinity.²¹ The degree is, normally, computed in steps of direct genealogical descent reckoned from one party up to the common ancestor and down to the other,²² so that Ysabella and Rogerò must have had a common grandparent. Four of the eight grandparents are well-known:



Sources: Sciascia²³ 44, 238; Haberkern 170; Muntaner 28, 93; Zurita 608; Testa 135.

Constanza, the mother of Frederick III, was the daughter of Frederick II's favourite son Manfred, who in his youth sported the surname Lancia in deference towards his mother Bianca Lancia. Given the very close relationship between the Lancia family and the Hohenstaufen it is tempting to hypothesize that the common grandparent is to be looked for there. These intricate relationships have been the subject of many a serious genealogical study which, essentially due to the dearth of sources presenting formidable investigational hurdles, practically yield very little.²⁴ For our purposes, at any rate, this is irrelevant. One cannot exclude either the Solimella/Solmella/de Olivella connexion, a Catalan family of some prominence that includes such notables as Bernardo de Olivella, Archbishop of Tarragona, who on 16 November 1276 crowned Pedro III.²⁵

21. Archivio Segreto Vaticano [=ASV] Reg. Vat. 51, f. 61, ep. 238A.

22. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. degree.

23. L. Sciascia, *Le donne ei cavalier, gli affanni e gli agi*, Sicania, Messina 1993.

24. The reader is referred to C. Merkel, *Manfredi I e Manfredi II Lancia*, Loescher, Torino-Firenze-Roma 1886 which gives a balanced criticism of other researches.

25. Zurita, ii, 13.

Of more interest are the dates of these events. Given the common practice at the time for girls to get married around the age of fourteen,²⁶ Ysabella would have been born around 1290 when her mother Sibilla would have been fifteen or sixteen years old, a teenager of Frederick's own age. A life expectancy averaging 60 to 65 suggests that it is not very likely that Sibilla survived Frederick (who died in 1337) by much. The foundation of the Saqqajja benefice, possibly established towards the end of her life and incorporated in her last will, can, therefore, quite safely be assigned a foundation date during the first half of the fourteenth century. This makes it quite possible that Don Pietro de Barba, mentioned in the collation of 1372, was its first or second incumbent.

One niggling question remains. Whatever was the connexion between Sibilla and Malta and Gozo? It is a fact that in the early decades of the fourteenth century the surname Solimella, perhaps more accurately Solmella, appears in Malta in the person of Arnaldus de Solimella who was justiciar and castellan of Malta certainly between 1316 and 1320.²⁷ Furthermore, a document of 1318 that corroborates this information, and to which Arnaldus was a witness, also mentions the late Skius de Solimella who, during his lifetime, had held the Gumerin estate (Eghmieri) as a royal fief and that he had died intestate and without legitimate heirs so that the garden had devolved to the Crown.²⁸ It is very tempting to view all three Solimellas – Arnaldus, Skius and Sibilla – as being all related, somehow. It is very likely that Arnaldus and Skius were faithful supporters of the Aragonese monarch who had been given by him trusted posts in strategically placed Malta in compensation for faithful service. This was, after all, very much the pattern of appointments at the time.²⁹ Given that Sibilla was only a boyhood flame of Frederick's – even after his marriage he had several other affairs –³⁰ it may have been convenient to have her out of one's way in distant Malta yet safely placed with relatives. Now older and wiser, the foundation of the benefice may have been Sibilla's expression of her persuasion and prayer: "My trust is in God; no mortal threat can daunt me" (Ps 56:5).

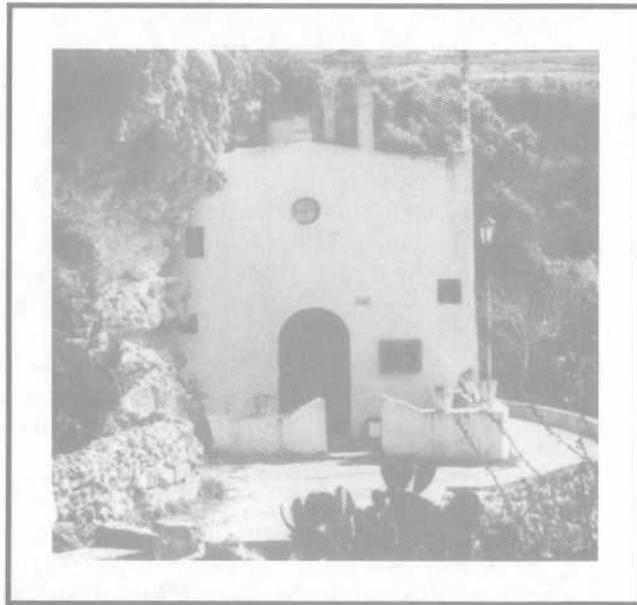
26. This was the case, for example, of Constanza daughter of Manfred, King of Sicily, who married the Infante Pedro of Aragon in 1262: Muntaner 20.

27. Text of 1316 in R. Valentini, 'Il patrimonio della Corona in Malta fino alla venuta dell'Ordine', *Archivio Storico di Malta*, v (1934) 32-4 and text of 1320 in F. Giunta & A. Giuffrida, *Acta Siculo-Aragonensia ii: Corrispondenza tra Federico III di Sicilia e Giacomo II d'Aragona*, Palermo 1972, 181-2.

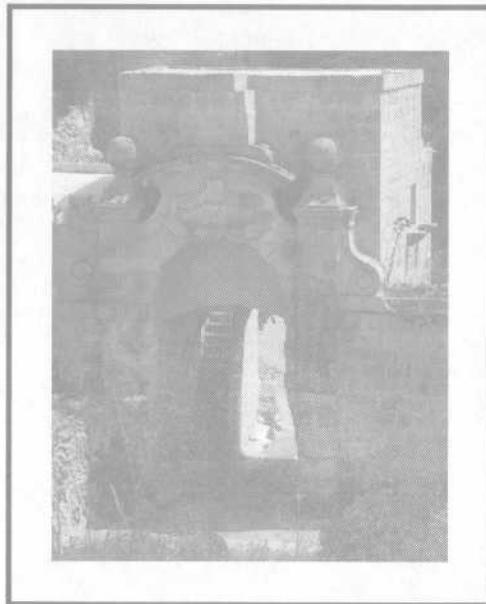
28. A.T. Luttrell, 'The Sale of Gumerin on Malta: 1318', *Estudios Historicos y Documentos de lo Archivos de Protocolos*, vi (1978) 167-77.

29. I. Peri, *La Sicilia dopo il Vespro*, (Laterza, Roma-Bari 1982) 31 *et seq.*: *Capitanee... conferite a personaggi di prima fila e a stretti congiunti...; castellanie... assegnate a militi distintisi... a nobili (aragonesi e catalani) venuti al seguito del re e inseriti entro la feudalità siciliana.*

30. Testa 135: From whom he had at least three sons: Sanchez, Alfonso Federico and Orlando. Alfonso Federico became Count of Malta on 18.xi.1330; Text in A. Rubiò i Lluch, *Diplomatari de l'Orient Català: 1301-1409*, (Barcellona 1947) 482-485.



The Lunjata Church at is-Saqqajja.



Eighteenth-century gateway to the Saqqajja Estate.