

THE EVOLUTION OF HERALDRY IN MALTA
(WITH REFERENCE TO THE NOBILITY)*

LA EVOLUCIÓN DE LA HERÁLDICA EN MALTA
(CON REFERENCIA A LA NOBLEZA)

DR. CHARLES A. GAUCI

Chief Herald of Arms of Malta

Instituto Internacional de Genealogía y Heráldica

Abstract: This article covers the origins of heraldry in Malta in parallel with the creation of the local nobility by the Aragonese Kings of Sicily, tracing very briefly the story of the nobility in Malta from its earliest days up to the present time. It reviews the problems facing any student of Maltese heraldry due to a lack, up until now, of any form of central control. The fact that common Arms are shared by different families bearing the same surname together with a complete lack of uniformity in the arms of the Maltese nobility are two major difficulties facing anyone interested in this subject. The author then traces the setting up of the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta in 2019 by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet who also appointed him as Chief Herald and the confirmation of this by the parliament of Malta in 2021, which has now formally entrenched heraldry in the laws of the island. The powers of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta are reviewed in some detail.

Resumen: Este artículo aborda los orígenes de la heráldica en Malta en paralelo a la creación de la nobleza local por parte de los reyes aragoneses de Sicilia, trazando muy brevemente la historia de la nobleza en Malta desde sus primeros días hasta la actualidad. Repasa los problemas a los que se enfrenta cualquier estudioso de la heráldica maltesa debido a la falta, hasta ahora, de cualquier forma de control central. El hecho de que las armas comunes sean compartidas por diferentes familias que llevan el mismo apellido, junto con la falta total de uniformidad en las armas de la nobleza maltesa, son dos de las principales dificultades a las que se enfrenta cualquier persona interesada en este tema. A continuación, el autor traza la creación de la Oficina del Herald Principal de Armas de Malta en 2019 por el Primer Ministro y el Gabinete, que también lo nombró Herald Principal, y la confirmación de esto por el Parlamento de Malta en 2021, que ahora ha afianzado formalmente la heráldica en las leyes de la isla. Los poderes del Herald Jefe de Armas de Malta se revisan con cierto detalle.

Keywords: Maltese nobility, Maltese heraldry, kings of Sicily, Consiglio popolare, Giurati, Chief Herald of Arms of Malta.

Palabras clave: Nobleza maltesa, heráldica maltesa, Reyes de Sicilia, Consiglio popolare, Giurati, Herald Mayor de Armas de Malta.

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The Maltese archipelago of Malta, Gozo, Comino, Cominotto and Filfla formed part of the Kingdom Sicily since the Norman Conquest of AD 1090. Malta is the largest island of the group, Gozo is next in size. In this article «Malta» refers jointly to Malta and Gozo, unless otherwise specified (Fig. 1).



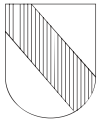
Fig. 1. The medieval Kingdom of Sicily

The islands were ruled successively by the Royal Houses of Hauteville, Hohenstaufen, Anjou, Aragon and Hapsburg. They were ceded to the Order of St. John in AD 1530, but still remained nominally part of the Kingdom of Sicily. They became part of the British Empire in AD 1814 and gained their independence in AD 1964, becoming a republic in AD 1974.

I have written extensively about the genealogy of the nobility and the heraldry of Malta (1).

The use of heraldry in Malta originated in the Aragonese period (1283-1516). The main sources for heraldry to be found in Malta today largely consist of structures which date back to the Aragonese rule of the Maltese islands, to structures built by the Order of St. John, to churches, cathedrals and basilicas (Malta is strongly Roman Catholic), to structures associated with the old nobility and to structures built during the British colonial era together with several old books and documents in both public and private collections.

In Malta there is a custom for people to display the coat of arms of «their» family on their houses. These arms are somewhat fictitious and are taken from a book called *Stemmi Maltesi*, published anonymously in the 19th century in folio form. People in Malta ha-



ve always assumed that every person bearing a given surname can display identical arms. This assumption rather defeats the scope of heraldry, which is one of personal identification. The Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta is now trying to educate people in the whole *raison d'être* of heraldry and to correct this false assumption.

A quote from a book by E.R. Leopardi, entitled *Malta's Heritage* (Progress Press Ltd., Malta 1969), is what inspired me, many, many years ago, while still a young medical student, to strive for the creation of an official heraldry authority in Malta (2).

Up until now, Malta has never had an official central authority to govern the use of coats of arms. The Order of St. John controlled the coats of arms of its members very tightly, but was not at all concerned with the heraldry of the native Maltese. The arms used locally are a collection of variations of foreign arms and of locally invented arms, hallowed by the use of time. As seen above, arms are, in general, used by families as opposed to individuals.

My interest in the heraldry of Malta started with a detailed study of the Arms of the Maltese nobility. Research revealed a state of total confusion, due no doubt to a lack of any form of central control. What I found was a variation in the precise style of individual coronets and helms, use of multiple helms in arms of Germanic origins, the occasional use of multiple mottos in families keen to show both their paternal and maternal heritage, the use of crests without helms, and a wide variation in the exact position of the coronet of rank *vis-à-vis* the helm. In some cases, the coronet is placed immediately above the shield (Fig. 2) while in other cases, it is placed above the helm (Figs. 3, 4). This makes it difficult for someone without a through knowledge of the Maltese nobility to differentiate between the Arms of a title holder and those of a cadet branch of that family. There is no fixed system of armorial display for the heir to a title and for his/her siblings, no system of cadency between the different branches of a noble family, no standardised system to display the arms of a married couple and females sometimes using «male-styled» Arms with a heater shield, helm with mantling, and a crest with torse.

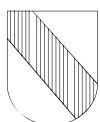


Fig. 2. Arms of a Maltese Marquis-coronet above shield



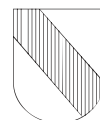
Fig. 3. Arms of a Maltese Baron-coronet above helm



Fig. 4. Arms of the 23rd Baron of Djar-il-Bniet and Of Buqana

THE NOBILITY IN MALTA

Nobility in Malta dates back to the XIII century. The very first title, that Baron of Fiddien was granted to the Santa Sofia family in 1287. Most of these ancient feudal titles were granted by the Kings of Sicily for military service to the crown but some were simple purchases. Under the Sicilian system, which also operated in Malta, fiefs could be bought and sold. As long as this was done with royal (or vice-regal) consent, then the Barony usually went with the land. All except two of these ancient feudal titles are now extinct. The two surviving titles, both held by the same individual who is the premier title-holder of



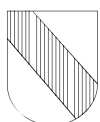
Malta are those of Baron of Djar-il-Bniet (1350) and Baron of Buqana (1372). (Fig. 4) The seniority of a title goes by its antiquity not by its degree. It is important to bear in mind that the titled nobility were not the only «nobility» in Malta and Gozo. There were also the Giurati.

The Consiglio Popolare was the island's traditional Council. The one in Malta was founded in the XIII century and the one in Gozo in the XIV century. The Consiglio controlled the internal affairs of the islands and its members delegated their powers to four Jurats (Giurati) of the Università' of Malta or of Gozo. These Giurati were elected to defend the ancient rights and customs of the Maltese and Gozitans. The electors to the Consiglio Popolare were the heads of families. The elected were chosen from the feudal nobility, honoured citizens, professional people or those exercising a liberal art, secular priests, businessmen and artisans. The Giurati, who qualified to have Coats of Arms, were regarded as an untitled nobility. The Governor (Capitano della Verga) elected by the Consiglio Popolare was often but not invariably, a titled nobleman. Each island had its own Governor.

Many titles were later created by the Knights of St. John, who took over as Sovereigns of Malta in 1530 and a number of their titles survive to this day. Titles granted by the Order of St. John were mostly nominally feudal but a few were actually tied to private estates. By nominally feudal, is meant that although the grantee was styled as Marquis/Count/Baron of (the fief), all revenue therefrom went straight to the Order, which retained possession of the land in question. Other titles created by foreign royal rulers were recognized by the Grandmasters as long as the grantee registered the title at the Chancellery of the Order and paid the requisite fee.

In some cases, the Grandmasters directly recognised the titleholder without the latter having registered the title in question. Most titles created by the Order and indeed by foreign monarchs were usually straight-forward purchases and not bestowed in recognition of any noteworthy achievements.

Most of the Maltese nobility's wealth was gained through corsairing i.e. licensed piracy, wheat importation and slave-trading. The money was then transferred into land, always considered to be the source of real wealth in Malta. When wealthy enough, the individual could purchase a title from the Order.



Napoleon Bonaparte captured Malta from the Order on the 12th June 1798. He immediately abolished the nobility, ordering the nobles to burn their Letters Patent of creation. Some nobles managed to save their documents which were, in any case, all entered in the archives of the Order in Valletta and elsewhere. Then, in 1800, came the British. Malta was the only British colony with its own indigenous European nobility and this rather confused the British who set up a Royal Commission to investigate the matter. Their report of 1878 together with subsequent correspondence, created «The Maltese Nobility» as it existed up until 1975 and the passage of the Gieh -ir-Republika Act.

Some later titles, during British rule and subsequently, were created by reigning Pontiffs and by other sources who legally held or indeed, still hold the Fons Honorum. These later creations do not form part of the «Maltese nobility» but of the «Nobility in Malta».

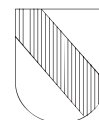
Maltese titles of nobility can be inherited in different ways. There is no general Salic law in Malta, forcing agnatic descent. Indeed, some titles are inherited by nomination. This has caused great problems in the past when the bulk of the family wealth or primogenitura has gone down the main agnatic line, while the title has wandered off down a collateral line. Having been a student of the Maltese nobility for over half a century, I can safely say that Maltese titles never seem to become extinct! There always seems to be a way in which a new lease of life can be injected into a moribund title. The nobility remains a strong source of heraldry with its arms displayed on buildings, in churches, on monuments and lapidary as well as on a number of documents in Malta (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Arms of a Maltese Nobleman, Mдина

COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES OF THE MALTESE NOBILITY

The Committee of Privileges of the Maltese nobility was founded in 1882 following the 1878 Royal Commission report and subsequent co-



responddence. It was empowered only to deal with the succession to Maltese titles recognized by the British government. All its recognitions were strictly «without prejudice to any decision taken by a Maltese Court of Law» (or by the Privy Council). Following passage of the the 1975 Gieh ir-Repubblika Act, the Committee lost its status and is now a purely private organization devoid of any power whatsoever. Indeed, the Maltese Courts have ruled that anyone in Malta can style themselves exactly as they please; this is no longer of any interest to the Government (3).

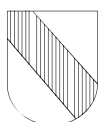
FORMATION OF THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF HERALD OF ARMS OF MALTA

a. initial stage

Following several months of intense lobbying, detailed correspondence and the preparation of reports for the Office of the Prime Minister, dealing with the importance of having a Heraldic office in Malta, the Prime minister of Malta, in consultation with the Cabinet decided to set up the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, under the aegis of Heritage Malta, the government body dealing with matters of culture.

The authorities were convinced that Heraldry, as part of Malta's intangible heritage, was, ipso facto included in the Cultural Heritage Act as it stood. Chapter 445 of the Cultural Heritage Act in fact empowered Heritage Malta «...to make provision in place of the Antiquities (Protection) Act, Cap. 54 for the superintendence, conservation and management of cultural heritage in Malta and for matters ancillary thereto or connected therewith».

On the 21st March 2019, I was informed, that upon the recommendation of the Honourable Prime Minister of Malta and the Cabinet Secretary at the Office of The Prime Minister, Heritage Malta, had established the Office of Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, which was to regulate all heraldry, both corporate and personal within the Republic of Malta. I was told that «In view of your own personal merits and extensive knowledge of the rules and norms of heraldry, you are invited to accept Heritage Malta's recommendation to the Prime Minister that you be appointed Chief Herald of Arms of Malta».



I was given an office at the historical Fort St. Elmo, situated at the entrance to the Grand Harbour in Valletta, which was the scene of bitter hand-to-hand fighting in the Great Siege of 1565 and which was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica Italiana in WW2 (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. The way to the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta at Fort St. Elmo, Valletta

My appointment, being an official government appointment, was duly published in the Malta Government Gazette (Fig. 7).

Having been given this responsibility, I set about designing the official Arms for the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta and submitted them to the Cabinet for approval. This was necessary because the Arms of the Office proposed by me contained the Arms of the Republic of Malta, the use of which is governed by very strict legislation. The Arms were approved by the Cabinet on 03 June 2019 and were later formally confirmed by Parliament on 21 January 2022. (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Notification, Malta Government Gazette



Fig. 8. Arms of the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta



The Blazon of the Arms, reads Below a crest coronet of fourteen oak leaves Or issuant from a wreath of the colours and upon a hurt edged of the First bearing the motto VIRTUTE ET CONSTANTIA and debruising two herald's maces of the First in saltire with dexter finial displaying the Cross and Arms of Aragon and sinister finial the Arms of Fortress Malta both Proper; the shield of Malta, with the whole supported by a Maltese Cross of the Second.

«The component parts of the Arms, can be thus explained:

The central Hurt (blue disc) represents the Mediterranean Sea in the centre of which lie the Maltese islands, hence the shield of Malta in the centre of the Hurt. The Hurt's golden edge represents Malta's «royal history» as part of the Kingdom of Sicily, the Rule of the Order (but still under the nominal authority of the Crown of Sicily) and the British Empire.

The finials on the Maces represent two of the principal royal authorities which once ruled over Malta.

The finial of the dexter Mace represents Aragon. It bears the undifferenced Arms of that kingdom. The shield of Aragon is surmounted by the medieval Cross of Aragon. The finial of the sinister Mace represents Fortress Malta, the seat of the Order of St. John. A mural crown is used to emphasise the fortress element of Malta.

The Arms bear a Crest Coronet, not a Coronet of rank since such would be totally inappropriate in a republic. The coronet does not have any royal connotations, but is loosely modelled on the Crown borne by the Garter King of Arms, the highest heraldic authority in the United Kingdom. Use of this crest is thus a nod towards our British heraldic heritage, which totally incidentally, is actually reinforced by the Red/White/Blue image of the Arms as one looks at them. The George Cross, of course, further underlines Malta's British heritage.

Naturally the Eight-Pointed Cross or «Maltese Cross» is very closely associated with Malta's history and it appears in the Maltese National Order of Merit. It is used in these Arms not only for its historical value but also to underline the fact that the National Order of Merit is Malta's highest institution of honour.

The Motto, VIRTUTE ET CONSTANTIA, alludes to a phrase which reverberates throughout the history of the Maltese islands. Grand Master de Valette used these words in his dispatch to King Philip II



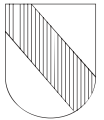
of Spain when describing the victory of the Great Siege of 1565. Pope Pius IV also addressed two briefs to the Grand Master after the raising of the Great Siege, using almost identical words, «incredibile virtute admirabiliaque constantia» (through unbelievable valour and admirable endurance). This motto appeared on Malta's first coat of Arms as an independent state and is also used on the seal of the National Order of Merit. It is used in the Arms of the Office of the Chief Herald as a specific tribute to the National Order of Merit».

It was decided to see whether the newly-established Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta would be a success before passing on to the next logical step and asking Parliament to pass specific legislation so as to formally entrench heraldry in the laws of Malta. The results totally exceeded our expectations. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic which hit the world a few months later, the Office was busy granting and registering Arms, not only to Maltese citizens but to a number of foreigners as well.

Many non-Maltese citizens sent in pictures of coats of arms which they had been using, asking that they be registered at the State-authorized Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta. If the Arms in question were originally granted by a state-recognised authority then they could be registered in Malta. If they were assumed then the very same Arms needed to be (re) granted by the Office, so as to give them the official backing of the State of Malta. If, however it could be proven that the Arms had been in uninterrupted use for a considerable period of time by the petitioner's ancestors, then they were considered to be registrable. Naturally, the Office also created Arms from scratch being guided by the petitioner's requirements.

As regards the functions of the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms, these include:

- New creations of personal Arms
- New creations of impersonal or corporate Arms
- Registration of Arms already formally granted by another recognised heraldic authority
- Registration of already-established personal Arms
- Registration of already-established impersonal Arms
- Registration of Arms held by Local Councils
- Ecclesiastical Heraldry (both personal and «corporate»)



In deference to history, the Maltese nobility were and still are free to maintain the Arms they have always used and these are registered exactly as they stand.

b. subsequently

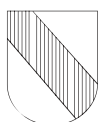
Given that the idea of an Office of Heraldry had proved to be such a resounding success, it was decided that it was time to proceed to the next stage.

The first step was to amend the Cultural Heritage Act so that it specifically mentioned heraldry within the remit of Heritage Malta. This would ensure the permanency of the Office of the Chief Herald. Detailed discussions then followed between the Chief Herald, Heritage Malta, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Justice and the Office of the Prime Minister. The Cultural Heritage Act (Cap. 445) was duly amended to specifically cater for the establishment of the Office of the Chief Herald. It was signed into law by The President of Malta on the 20th July 2021.

While all this was going on, the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta presented personal Arms to the President of Malta, registered the Arms of His Grace the Archbishop of Malta, presented Arms to the Diocese of Gozo, through His Lordship The Bishop of Gozo and to other personalities (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Presentation of personal Arms by the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta to HE The President of Malta



DR. CHARLES A. GAUCI

In accordance with the provisions of the amended Cultural Heritage Act, it was decided that the modus operandi of the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta now needed to be formally codified in law. Meanwhile, the regulations previously existing and which had been amply displayed on the Office's website would continue to operate. More detailed discussions followed and finally a full set of regulations were prepared and presented to Cabinet for its approval. These approved regulations were published as a Legal Notice on 24th December 2021 and became law on the 21st January 2022. The detailed regulations were published in a special supplement to the Malta Government Gazette on 25th January 2022 (Fig. 10).

On 31st January 2022, Dr. Charles Gauci was summoned to the Ministry for National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government (The «Ministry of Culture»), to be confirmed as the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, in the name of Parliament (Fig. 11).

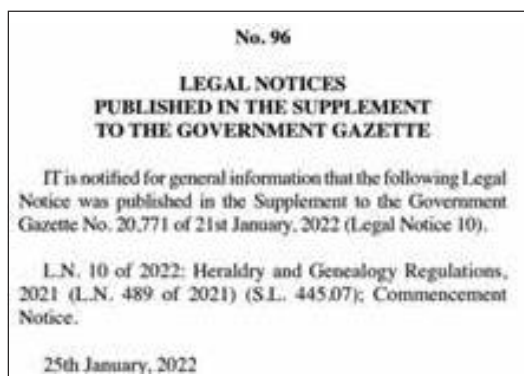
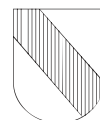


Fig. 10. New regulations published in the Malta Government Gazette



Fig. 11. Confirmation of appointment of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta



IMPORTANT CLAUSES IN THE NEW REGULATIONS

The new regulations contain a number of interesting points.

The preamble, when listing which individuals are eligible to be granted Arms or to have their Arms registered at the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, states that these include «individuals holding constitutional offices, Maltese nationals and foreign nationals».

The right, decided by parliament, of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta to grant Arms to or register Arms for non-Maltese citizens, wherever they may reside is, thus, clearly laid down by law.

Article 12: states that «Arms may be granted to or registered by an individual or body corporate at the discretion of the Chief Herald».

The Chief Herald of Arms of Malta therefore has the right, given to him by parliament to grant or register Arms, at his discretion to whosoever he pleases,

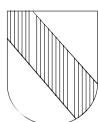
Article 18 states that «All grants and registrations of Arms including the mention of honours and titles shall be without prejudice to the Gieh ir-Repubblika Act and are made solely for historical purposes».

Malta, as a republic does not formally recognize titles of nobility although freely permitting their use. It has also a very limited recognition of Orders. The mention of honours and titles in the Letters Patent is permitted, but does not imply the recognition of such honours and titles by the State.

Article 19: states that the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta «shall be permitted to use the Arms of Malta», thus confirming what was previously approved by the Cabinet.

The regulations also dictate the process which must be followed when any person applies for a grant or registration of Arms

The law now stipulates that once the Arms are agreed, details of the petitioner and the blazon of the Arms to be granted/registered are placed in the Malta Government Gazette, 21 days must then pass in case anyone objects. The Letters Patent/Document of registration are/is later finalised and sent out to the petitioner.



DR. CHARLES A. GAUCI

The Arms are placed in our Armorial Register, which we are obliged to keep by Act of Parliament (this is now available on-line).

In January every year the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta is obliged to publish full details (blazons) in the Malta Government Gazette of all Arms registered/granted during the previous year.

Part IV, Section 8 of the regulations which oblige the Chief Herald of Arms to keep a register (Armorial) of all Arms granted to or registered by Individuals and Entities, also obliges the Chief Herald to keep a list of all hereditary honours (titles of nobility) mentioned in the Letters Patent and Documents of registration issued by his Office.

PREVIOUS GRANTS/REGISTRATIONS

Soon after the new regulations were put into law, every person who had been granted Arms or who had their Arms registered prior to the new regulations coming into force, received the following communication from me:

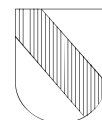
«Further to my recent email message outlining the new legislative changes concerning heraldry in Malta, I am, in my capacity as Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, under Regulations L. N. 489 of 2022, issued under the amended Cultural Heritage Act, Cap. 445 of 2021, pleased to confirm that your Arms granted under the 2019 Government Notice are automatically recognized and now enjoy further protection under the new regulations. As a matter of course, these arms will now be duly enrolled/registered under the aforesaid 2022 Regulations at no charge».

INSIGNIA OF OFFICE

The Chief Herald of Arms of Malta, although by tradition entitled to wear a Tabard, wears a simple collar which proudly displays the insignia of his Office (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Ceremonial collar, Chief Herald of Arms of Malta



ICOC-CERT SCHEME (International Commission for Orders of Chivalry)

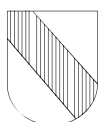
The International Commission for Orders of Chivalry's main purpose is to prevent the spread of false Orders of Chivalry and to this end it has now launched a scheme, called the ICOC-CERT, based on Blockchain technology so as to register and issue unique certificates to persons belonging to recognized Orders. In order to obviate the granting/registration of coats of arms and pedigrees by non-state authorized private institutions, which carry no weight in law, ICOC has also decided to extend this certification to coats of arms granted/registered as well as to pedigrees registered by bona fide heraldic state institutions, which include the Office of the Chief Herald of Arms of Malta.

CONTACTING THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF HERALD OF ARMS OF MALTA

The email address is chiefherald@gov.mt

(1)

- a) The Genealogy and Heraldry of the Noble Families of Malta, Vol. 1 (GPL, Malta, 1981).
- b) The Palaeologos Family - a genealogical review (PEG, Malta, 1985).
- c) A Guide to the Maltese Nobility (PEG, Malta, 1986).
- d) «1349: Cicco Gatto Governor of Malta to Ludovico, King of Sicily», in Lost Letters, edited by Nicholas J. de Piro (London, 1986).
- e) A Key to Maltese Coats of Arms (PEG, Malta, 1988).
- f) An Illustrated Collection of the Coats of Arms of Maltese Families (PEG, hardback edition, Malta, 1989; paperback edition, Malta, 1996).
- g) The Genealogy and Heraldry of the Noble Families of Malta, Vol. 2 (PEG, Malta, 1992).
- h) A Collection of Genealogical Tables of European Families (privately printed, London 2001 & presented to National Library of Malta, Ref. NLM226937).



DR. CHARLES A. GAUCI

- i) *The Genealogy and Heraldry of the Noble Families of Malta*, Vol. 1 (PEG, reprinted with addenda, 2002).
- j) «... of Maltese Generals and Admirals» (Midsea Books, Malta, 2015).
- k) *INGUANEZ and related families* (privately printed in Malta, 2017).
- l) *The Peerage and Knightage in Malta*, (Midsea Books, Malta 2018).

(2) Characteristic of Malta is allowance for personal freedom by which I mean you can do as you like so long as you do not encroach on the rights of others. Nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the use of Coats-of-Arms of the many surnames in Malta. There is no College of Arms or heraldry office in Malta — nor for that matter is the use of Armorial Bearings a privilege with taxation attached to it. Everyone is allowed to use a Coat-of-Arms suitable to his surname and no one would dream of questioning his right to do so.

(3) (30-01-04, *Ramsay v. Bugeja*).