

**FRANCESCO PATERNO' CASTELLO
DI CARCACI**

I PATERNO'

DI SICILIA

**CATANIA
OFF.TYP. ZUCCARELLO & IZZI
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**GIOVANNI THE ELDER
BARONE DELLA NICCHIARA, DEL BURGIO E DEL MURGO**

The historians of the family are unanimous that Giovanni was still a boy when the terrible plague of 1347 snatched away his parents and brothers, leaving him alone in the world. Scipione Paternò Colonna writes that Divine Providence had set aside this lonely boy to carry on their memory, Heaven beginning to show at that moment all the progress that was yet to be hoped for in this family through the numerous progeny which had been preserved in this little boy.

Following in the steps of his ancestors in his devotion to the Kings of our nation, he consequently accumulated considerable honours from them. The first document which we can attribute to him is that of his appointment by King Frederick III as *Vicesecreto* of Syracuse. As he grew both in age but also in importance, Giovanni saw himself confirmed in that office, being granted it for life, with the power of substitution and in order to support him in such office an annual revenue of 20 *onze* of gold. When King Frederick died, Giovanni lent his support to Queen Maria and the guardian, whom her father had left for her in the person of the great judge Artale Alagona, against the mutinies of the rebellious barons. In fact we see him holding at that time the important office of Chief Justice of Catania. When at that time arose the deadly struggle between the papal and the anti-papal parties, he declared himself to be a decided supporter of the legitimate pontiff and, having ejected the heretical bishop Elia, he dedicated

himself to stabilising the position of the true pastor Simone del Pozzo; we see him align himself with the latter in a document of the 23rd May 1391.

When Queen Maria was abducted and married to the Infant Martin, Giovanni, as a friend of Artale Alagona with intimate ties going way back, dedicated himself to the pacifying of heated minds and restoring the Kingdom to its faithful allegiance to its Queen, whoever may have been her consort; and as a result of such actions on his part, the new sovereigns immediately confirmed him in his ancient privileges. Soon afterwards by these same Maria and Martin were entrusted to him “these arduous negotiations of ours” as appears in a decree from them to the *vicesecreto* of Noto, who was thus to make available to Giovanni such sums as he may have needed in the conduct of the said negotiations. Twenty days on from that decree we find another addressed to the *capitano* of Mineo, concerning his taking possession of the barony of Nicchiara, or Cuchara, not far from that city. From that time onward we see him cited in royal documents with the styles of Knight and Counsellor.

Martin and Maria, ever more appreciative of the talents of this person and in order to make greater use of his services about their Court, proposed to replace him definitively in his responsibility in Syracuse, leaving with him however an revenue still of 10 *onze* of gold (1393), and finally they conferred on him the formal investiture in the fiefs del Burgio including their salt-flats, of Maucino, Beliscari, Binvini and Trifiletta, near the sea looking towards Africa, for himself, his heirs already born and yet to be born of his body, in the Frankish tradition, which would give him a certain revenue of 60 *onze* of gold, and they added the customary military service of the provision of an armed horseman for every 20 *onze* of income. We know that the main purpose of the feudal institutions was to furnish the armed forces of the state from the territories of the fiefs and thus the fiefholder had the duty to render to his sovereign a military tribute proportionate to the importance of the income derived from the territory in which he had been invested. In the earliest times this military service was provided in the person of the baron himself who, at the king’s summons, would hasten fully armed and with a retinue more or less numerous of horses and attendants; subsequently it was allowed to substitute for your person and then later even make a compensatory payment. Among us by a very ancient tradition it was established the practice of the service of one knight for every 20 *onze* of gold income from a fief and by knight should be understood a horseman together with his shield-bearer and an attendant with three horses, each of which had its special designation : a destrier or charger was that of the knight, a palfrey for the page and a nag for the attendant.

We have seen that this fief del Burgio and its Salt-flats had been previously in the possession of Gualtiero, the great-grandfather of Giovanni, in the reign of

Frederick II; but we don't know how it came to be lost by his descendants, yet the certainty is that this new concession by King Martin was opposed by Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, who did all he could to have it awarded to himself by the king, who thus had to compensate Giovanni in some other fashion. Moncada then ceded the fief to Rinaldo Landolina with royal approval (Catania, 1st December 1395) and it was against the Landolina family that Gualtiero, son of Giovanni, had to mount a legal challenge for restitution as we shall see in due course.

King Martin and Queen Maria took up residence in the castle of Catania, having a particular liking for our city, the bastion of the Catalan party, and they took steps to beautify it with new buildings and the restoration of old ones and to that end they issued a law in 1406 which gave permission to any nobleman, who wished to erect a palace, to expropriate any contiguous dwelling or house or open courtyard or similar, in order to demolish it and replace it with an edifice of noble architecture. But before such a licence was made general, they rewarded Giovanni with a courtyard with two houses which were to become his own residence and over and above such generosity one hundred *onze* of gold to be deducted from the third belonging to the King of the goods confiscated in Burgio from Tommaso de Massaro, a supporter of the rebel Artale Alagona. Then with great expense of money and effort by the said Giovanni this courtyard with the houses were transformed to be “a not inconsiderable ornament for his Family, his city and our (i.e. the Sovereigns’) delight so that then we grant laws with a view to similar such more worthy, more appropriate houses being constructed as we wish to see and open places becoming gardens”.

This palace passed down to Nicola, son of Giovanni, and from him to the grandson Alvaro, the Roman senator; from Alvaro it passed to Aluisi and his descendants. When in 1655 the fourth Alvaro married Isabella Sigona, who brought in her dowry the house in piazza Manganelli, the Paternò ceded their ancient palace in the Foro Lunare to the family of della Valle, the Barons della Miraglia; then it was inhabited by the family of della Stella, the Barons dell’Annunziata, who lived in it until it was destroyed by the earth-quake of 1693. It was deemed to be the most beautiful palace in Catania and according to the historians there were to be seen carved above the windows the arms of the Paternò and in one of its saloons these were painted along with those of Spadafora in memory of Sibilla, the wife of Giovanni the Elder. Guglielmini mentions this palace as being “entirely decorated with statues and garlands”. There are those who think that the richly decorated window belonged to it which was found a few decades ago under the foundations of a house, not far from piazza degli Studi, and which was believed to have been the doorway of the church of San Giovanni de’ Freri. However, the ancient palace had stood in that vicinity and its balconies, which had frequently been honoured by visits from

the Sovereigns, gave onto the Foro Lunare in which were given jousts and tournaments. Such festivities carried on after King Martin; the tournament of 1405 remains famous which was held to celebrate the marriage of the Count of Quarto, the castellan of Catania, with the daughter of Giovanni Ramondetto, in which many Sicilian and Catalan knights participated and among those of our people Corrado Castello, Antonio Asmari and Antonio Monsone were worthy of applause.

In 1395 Martin and Maria entrusted Giovanni with the duty of returning to Syracuse and Noto in order to preside over the elections of public officers. Two years later they appointed him as chief financial officer of the Royal Court following the transfer from that office of their relative Ludovico d'Aragona to be *strategoto* of Messina. Around this time he was also rewarded with the barony of del Murgo, between Lentini and the sea. Also at this period he was given the task of supervising the restoration of the Abbey of Nuovaluce near to Catania. Then in 1398 when a census was decreed to cover the entire population of the Kingdom, he was charged with this responsibility by the King as Vicar General. In the following year King Martin confirmed him in the position as chief financial officer, extending it for the duration of his life, which office corresponded with that of Chamberlain which was one of the seven Offices of State established by the Norman kings.

Giovanni died in 1400 and was buried in the church of the Augustinians. His wife was Sibilla Spadafora of that most noble family, the fief-holders of la Roccella and Maletto, which still flourishes to this day.