

**Local Ornithologists and the Early Study of
Central Mediterranean Avifauna: the Role of Schembri
and Damiani in the Maltese and Tuscan Islands**

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The development of Ornithology in the Mediterranean basin largely took place in the course of the 19th century, when many field studies — mainly inspired by the fashion of scientific collections — led to the exploration of the bird fauna of its coasts and islands. Museum researchers based in some of the countries edging the Mediterranean had of course an important role (and an easier one). As a rule, however, their activity did not reach the very remote islands or the less accessible coasts. Ornithologists from England and Germany (i.e. from the two major schools existing at that time: Stresemann 1975), instead, pioneered the marine and insular approach, prevailing on the western and eastern sectors of the Mediterranean, respectively. There are, of course, many exceptions to this rather simplified view, such as the British activity in Egypt or that of the naturalists from the Piedmont Kingdom in Sardinia. The latter led to the description of important Mediterranean endemic species (such as *Falco eleonora*, and *Sylvia sarda*). Nevertheless, this sort of dichotomic tradition went on well into the next century and well outside the museum approaches (cf. Mountfort 1958 on exploration of the Andalusian wetlands, Ristow et al. 1991 on long-term studies of seabirds and falcons on Crete and many other examples).

Only on a few of the very large islands were some local naturalists active in the study of birds: Luigi Benoit and several others in Sicily, Gaetano Cara and Pietro Bonomi (and, already in the 18th century, Francesco Cetti) in Sardinia. The lack of local expertise on all of the smaller islands, characterized not only the study of birds but probably many other aspects of culture and was no doubt due to local economy, living conditions, and even to small human population sizes, not to mention the difficulties of transportation. Although motorized navigation originated in the Mediterranean (Naples, 1818), for many years most connections depended on sail.

Two different islands of a similar, medium size, both located in central Mediterranean but very different from each other in nature and history, gave birth to two most notable personalities whose ornithological contributions went far beyond the publication of a travelogue or that of an occasional list of birds. These personalities are Antonio Schembri and Giacomo Damiani who lived at different times; Schembri in fact died about the time Damiani was born.

ANTONIO SCHEMBRI

Antonio Schembri (Fig. 1) was born in Valletta, Malta, in April 1813 of a relatively rich and educated family. He died at the age of 59, in December 1872. Valletta was in the early 1800s a relatively large town, a strategic harbour, as well as an important trading center. Schembri himself was at the age of 25 director of his father's business that handled the maritime transport of merchan-

dise. During his relatively short life he published several books and papers on a variety of subjects dealing with ornithology, economics, agriculture, emigration, and biographies amongst others. He is also remembered for collecting a fly which was named after him by Camillo Rondani (*Ochthera schembrii*).

Besides his numerous publications, and his active involvement in various Maltese societies and government commissions, Antonio Schembri is mostly referred to as the father of Maltese ornithology (Attard 1972). He identified a niche in the natural history of Malta that had not been exploited. In fact, only general references and travelogues were available at that time on the Maltese birds. In spite of his various commitments, not least of which was his family's business, he made an excellent contribution to ornithology by producing within a short period of three years, from 1843 to 1846, three large scientific publications. His first publication laid down the foundations of Maltese Ornithology.

In 1843 he published, in Italian, the first scientific annotated checklist of the birds of the Maltese Islands *Catalogo Ornitologico del Gruppo di Malta*, treating 299 wild species and 4 domestic ones. In most cases he avoided describing the birds so as, in his own words, not to repeat what had appeared previously in works by Coenraad Jacob Temminck, Paolo Savi and John Gould. However, he gave a plumage description of those birds that were not included in Savi's work, such as the houbara bustard, *Chlamidotis undulata*, for instance. He followed the classification order used by Savi and in many ways the style of the *Ornitologia Siciliana* by Luigi Benoit (1840), published only three years earlier. He frequently corresponded with Benoit. He described the status of all the birds known to occur in the islands and added the Maltese, English, and French names for most of the species. He also described in detail and illustrated the storm-petrel breeding on the islet of Filfla, claiming that it was a new species for science, and naming it *Thalassidroma melitensis*. It was not a new species, but no one could really blame him for having believed so, because earlier descriptions of *Thalassidroma pelagica* (= *Hydrobates pelagicus*) had left out some characteristics, which he had noted in the birds breeding on the islet. He has been, since then, somewhat vindicated as the population of the storm-petrel in the Mediterranean is now regarded as a different subspecies from the Atlantic form (Cagnon et al. 2004), and of course his denomination could not be disregarded, our birds being now *Hydrobates pelagicus melitensis* Schembri.

Besides commenting on the status of many common species, he was able to document the occurrence of many rarities, which is perhaps not surprising in view of the collection-inspired habits of his time. And he did this with extreme precision. He reported, for instance, the case of great bustards crashing into the Ta Cenc' cliffs on Gozo Island while migrating in stormy weather, and many similar details.

In the same year of his *Catalogo* (1843), he published also the *Quadro Geografico Ornitologico Ossia Quadro Comparativo dell'Ornitologia di Malta, Sicilia, Roma, Toscana, Liguria, Nizza e la Provincia di Gard*. This was a comparative ornithological study. He compared the ornithology of Malta, Sicily, Rome, Tuscany, etc., and listed the species in their respective columns for each place, giving brief general information on them (mostly range and breeding habitat). This was, perhaps, the earliest publication to cover at one time the ornithology of several different places in central southern Europe. No doubt he was inspired by Charles L. Bonaparte, whose two publications (*Specchio Comparativo delle Ornitologie di Roma e Filadelfia* in 1827 and *Geographical and Comparative List of the Birds of Europe & North America* in 1838) advocated the views of

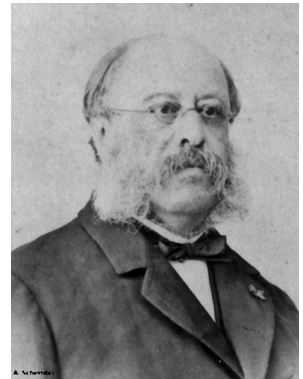


FIGURE 1. Antonio Schembri. Photo courtesy of J.M. Attard Tabone.

Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, of how beneficial the comparison of birds of various regions was to ornithology. Schembri corresponded regularly with Bonaparte, who helped him when he was compiling his *Catalogo*. On the other hand, Schembri helped Bonaparte when the latter was working on his monumental *Iconografia della Fauna Italica*, wherein Bonaparte described for the first time the trumpeter finch *Bucanetes githagineus*, from a live specimen sent to him by Schembri. Also in the entry for the pin-tailed sandgrouse, *Pterocles alchata*, Bonaparte wrote “*Vivo noi lo avemmo da Malta: e ciò fu dono del valente giovane signor Antonio Schembri nativo di quell’isola, dal quale ricevemmo insieme cento altri oggetti graditi*”.

After the publication of the the *Catalogo* and the *Quadro Geografico*, H.E. Strickland in his *Recent Progress and Present State of Ornithology*, published in 1845, stated that “The Island of Malta possesses an able ornithologist in Sig^r Schembri” and his two publications “form almost the first works on zoology ever printed in the island of Malta, and they show that, even in the most insulated localities, an active naturalist will always find abundant occupation”.

Apart from the two publications mentioned above, Schembri’s highly-esteemed contribution to European ornithology is found in his third book “*Vocabolario dei Sinonimi Classici dell’Ornitologia Europea*” that was published in Bologna in 1846 but earlier presented in manuscript form by Schembri himself with a brief introductory oral presentation at the 7th *Congresso degli Scienziati Italiani*, held in Naples in 1845. The *Vocabolario* gained for him a European ornithological reputation.

Schembri was well versed in the ornithological literature and had a vast library, which included all the best-known ornithological publications of his time, and he made good use of these by always referring to them in his works. He had a large personal collection of mounted birds, as well as shells, insects, and fossils. Unfortunately, none of his collections, personal papers or manuscripts have survived and only a few of his books have been traced, such as his copies of Bonaparte’s *Iconografia*.

GIACOMO DAMIANI

If Antonio Schembri’s name is still well known, at least within the context of the history of Mediterranean ornithology, that of Giacomo Damiani (Fig. 2) — native of Elba Island — has been almost totally forgotten for many decades. After having written several papers on birds, fishes, and cetaceans, and after having participated in all of the early Italian Zoological congresses, and having been the local organizer of one of them (in 1905), he seems to have simply vanished from the scene a couple of decades before he died in 1944. Indeed, an obituary announcing his death was never even published.

Giacomo Damiani was born in August 1871 into a wealthy family at Magazzini, in the countryside facing the Gulf of Portoferraio, on Elba. In this villa (now turned into a psychiatric hospital), he spent almost all his life, at least until 1913, when he left the island, only to return in 1937, when he retired from work and went to live in another house not far off, at Schiopparello. As a profession, he was a teacher of Natural Sciences in the secondary schools, having graduated from the University of Genoa, where he had studied under the supervision of Prof. Corrado Parona. His interest in birds started undoubtedly when he was very young, perhaps simply from bird-catching at his family’s *paretaio* (clap-nets) near Magazzini, which is mentioned in a couple of his early writings. But he probably never turned into a fanatical



FIGURE 2. Giacomo Damiani in 1924, during his Forlì period. Photo courtesy Mr. Dubraver.

hunter himself; in fact, in later papers, he often reports on rarities shot by his elder brother, Paolo, or by other people. By the age of 20, he had already been in contact with Enrico Giglioli, the leading Italian ornithologist of the time, who was based at the museum in Florence. Damiani's name actually appeared for the first time — as an author — on the pages of the *Bollettino del Naturalista* in 1891, a brief announcement to the readers that the publication of the results of Giglioli's national ornithological inquiry were going to be postponed. In the same journal, in 1892 and 1893, he published three parts of a long paper titled 'Rondini e Rondoni' (martins and swifts), in which he analysed Giglioli's data about these species on a national basis, adding some personal remarks from his area, such as about 'thousands' of alpine swifts screaming around Palmaiola islet, where they are no longer present. His effort is one of the few real analyses of Giglioli's data, with observations arranged into tables, utilizing a comparative approach, which is virtually absent in Giglioli's books (1886, 1889–1891, 1907). In the same year (1892), two more of his papers appeared: the first dealt with marine fishes ('Prima contribuzione alla ittiofauna del mare dell'Elba'), also perhaps inspired by Giglioli, who was an ichthyologist in his spare time, and the second, which was to be the first of his 'Note ornitologiche dall'Elba', a series of papers published during the next 20 years in which he reported with a variable frequency all his ornithological findings. At the end of 1892, Damiani regretted having to decrease his monitoring efficiency in order to attend university courses on the mainland. In this Genoan period, however, he was able to maintain close contacts with his monitoring network on Elba. Specimens were mailed to him in Genoa (even large-sized items such as a black-throated diver, *Gavia arctica*, which had been shot at Portoferraio salt-pans in Dec. 1892), and he regularly returned home for the summer holidays. His periodic reports, both on birds and fishes, did not really decrease. In 1895, he wrote on a broader subject, the irruptive migrations of Pallas's sandgrouse, *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*, and razorbill, *Alca torda*, with original data about the latter species from Elba as well as from the Gulf of Genoa. This was followed in 1896 by a monographic paper on the gobiid fishes of Italy, a couple of papers on the fishes of the Genoan sea and an interesting discussion 'on the correct attributes' to be used for describing the phenology of migratory birds, again, quite a modern effort at standardization, in which he tried to separate the concepts of abundance, regularity and frequency of appearance. His Genoan stay ended in this year (1896).

Once back on Elba, his activity flourished. In a short note on the bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*), he welcomed the forthcoming birth of a new national journal, the first specifically devoted to birds. To this new journal, *Avicula*, he transferred most of his regular 'note ornitologiche' and he wrote important papers on little known seabirds (*Larus audouinii*, "I *Puffinus* dell'Elba") as well as the catalogue of the Toscanelli local bird collection. However, he did not forget the *Proceedings of the Ligurian Society of Natural History*, which he had exploited during his Genoan years, offering two new papers on *Phalaropus hyperboreus* and on the first Italian record of *Turdus ustulatus*, an American vagrant.

At the turn of the century, good and bad things happened: in 1901 he married Licinia Boni, ten years younger, and at the same time the salt pans of Portoferraio were destroyed to make room for industrial development; these were the last remaining salt pans of Tuscany, those on the mainland having been destroyed long before, and they represented a unique habitat where nearly all Damiani's waterbirds had been recorded. In these years, he not only continued sending lots of specimens to the museum in Florence, but he was also directly involved in assembling a large zoological collection, "la collezione Elbana", which belonged first to Cavalier Tonietti and then to Oreste Del Buono, being hosted at Villa San Martino (until about 15 years ago, more than 900 bird specimens remained in the collection). In 1903, Damiani participated in the Rimini Congress of the Unione Zoologica Italiana with a talk on sharks, and in 1905 he organized a meeting of the same congress

on Elba. ‘His’ congress was opened with some unusually enthusiastic words of praise by the mayor of Portoferraio, that was not too surprising inasmuch as the mayor was Giacomo’s brother, not Paolo, the hunter, whom we have already met, but Leone Damiani, a lawyer.

During his main years of scientific activity, Damiani, writing on Italian dolphins, offered the first evidence for *Stenella coeruleoalba*, a species that is common nowadays but at the time was not (or was not recognized). He then recorded the very rare Minke whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*, and observed other cetacean strandings, such as a fin whale, *Balaenoptera physalus*, a photo of which is still hanging at his home. As for birds, he described the crossbill, *Loxia curvirostra*, invasions in one of the last *Avicula* issues (the journal ceased publishing in 1910) and greeted the newly founded *Rivista Italiana di Ornitologia* with a large, general paper on the birds of the Tuscan Archipelago, hosted in the first volume and coauthored with E. Arrigoni degli Oddi. This is perhaps the best known of his publications. In the same journal, in 1913, he presented an accurate overview about the gannet in Italy (*Sula bassana*). But this, and his note on *Regalecus*, were the last of his scientific papers; both written when he was still quite young, only 42 years old. This sudden silence clearly coincided with his move from Elba to teach in Genoa. It was followed by a second move to Forlì before 1922 and a third to Brescia in 1933. His silence was only interrupted in 1923, during his years at the R. Liceo di Forlì, when his friend Sandro Foresi — an active editor in Portoferraio — persuaded him to write a section for the zoological chapter for the geographic guide ‘L’Elba Illustrata’. In this same book, his brother Leone — the former mayor — wrote an historical chapter, together with a few other authors, all of them ‘*figli diletti dell’isola nostra, che hanno i titoli maggiori per dirne degnamente*’ and who were chosen by Foresi as co-workers. Giacomo’s pages do not sound at all like the product of a person who is no longer interested in the area; he speaks of sperm whales that he saw in the summer of 1921, well after he had moved, of his dreams for the creation of a marine biology station at the Enfolà Peninsula, in place of the ancient tuna fishtrap, and he complains about the rarity in Italy of the ‘field ornithologists’ (in English in his text), a category that is even rarer than the most vagrant bird species. The reasons for his silence, therefore, are impossible to understand. He died in October 1944 at his Schiopparello home, being survived by his wife, who lived for many years thereafter.

Damiani’s role, particularly as an ornithologist, is remarkable. Elba Island was only mentioned in the national bird literature in a 17th century report about canaries said to have escaped from a wrecked vessel (actually Corsican finches *Serinus corsicanus* [*vide* Barbagli and Violani 1997]), then for a couple of species mentioned by Savi (1827–1831), and for a few specimens sent by Toscanelli to Florence museum (Giglioli 1886). In only a few years, Damiani’s most accurate ‘note ornitologiche dall’Elba’ earned this island the nickname of ‘the Helgoland of the Mediterranean’ by Arrigoni. Helgoland Island, in the North Sea, after the popular studies by Gaetke (1891), had a strong evocative power even in Italy, being synonymous with bird migration, and a migratory bottleneck of utmost importance and of almost mythical proportions. This was perhaps the best acknowledgment of his activity.

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