GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEUSA

A BIOGRAPHY THROUGH IMAGES

Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi

Picture research by Nicoletta Polo

with a Foreword by David Gilmour

Translations by Alessandro Gallenzi and J.G. Nichols

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A BIOGRAPHY THROUGH IMAGES
Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in the gardens of Villa Piccolo in the Autumn of 1956.
In the retinue of Marcantonio Colonna, who was appointed Viceroy of Sicily by Philip II of Spain in 1577, there came to Sicily a Capuan gentleman called Mario Tomasi, the descendant of one of the branches of the Tomasi family which had moved from central Italy to the Kingdom of Naples. Mario was captain at arms, a sort of military chief with government duties. Among the various responsibilities entrusted to him by the Viceroy were the governorship of the Noto Valley in 1580 and of the Mazzara Valley in 1583 (Sicily had been divided by the Arabs in three districts – or valleys: Val Demone, Val di Noto and Val di Mazzara). It appears that during Colonna’s time of office Mario Tomasi was guilty of several acts of embezzlement, and he was arrested in Spain. But he was a powerful lord who had armed two galleys for the Battle of Lepanto, and he had close links with the nobility of Messina, where the Christian fleet had assembled in 1571.

In 1583, after being discharged from prison, Mario Tomasi married Francesca Caro, heiress to the Barons of Montechiaro and Lords of Lampedusa, a family of sea captains of Catalan origin in the service of Aragon who had come to Sicily at the time of King Martin the
Elder. Mario and Francesca had two sons, Ferdinando and Mario. The latter was appointed governor of Licata, which was then one of the few fortified ports on the eastern coast. Ferdinando, who lived in Ragusa and married Isabella La Restia, had two children, the twins Carlo and Giulio. On 16th January 1637 Philip IV signed a *licentia populandi* (“permission to establish a settlement”), and on 3rd May Carlo Tomasi e Caro laid the first stone of the new city of Palma in

Below: A Prospect of Palma (oil on canvas, beginning of the eighteenth century). The Tomasi palace can be seen on the left, the Monastery of the Holy Rosary on the right.

Previous page: The “holy” Tomasis, oil on canvas by Domenico Provenzani. At the top, Our Lady of the Rosary between St Dominic, St Rosalia and St James; first row: Sister Maria Maddalena (Antonia Tomasi, daughter of Giulio I), the Venerable Mother Maria Lanceata (Alipia Tomasi, daughter of Giulio I), the Venerable Mother Maria Maddalena (sister of Ferdinando II), Ferdinando Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa (son of Giulio I); second row: Sister Maria Crocifissa (Isabella Tomasi, daughter of Giulio I), the Venerable Mother Maria Serafica (Francesca Tomasi, daughter of Giulio I), Cardinal Giuseppe Maria Tomasi (son of Giulio I); third row: the semi-legendary Bishop Pietro Tomasi, Patriarch of Constantinople in 1307, Giulio I Tomasi e Caro, Duke of Palma, Sister Maria Seppellita (Rosalia Traina, wife of Giulio I) and Father Carlo Tomasi (twin brother of Giulio I). For a family tree of the Tomasi lineage, see pp. 96–97.
Above: Frontispiece of a collection of documents by Mario Tomasi, 1st Baron of Montechiaro, captain at arms, founder of the Tomasi line in Sicily. Below left: Carlo Tomasi, 1st Duke of Palma, Theatine monk and founder of Palma with his twin brother Giulio (oil on canvas, beginning of the eighteenth century). Below right: Giulio Tomasi, the “Holy Duke”, 2nd Duke of Palma and 1st Prince of Lampedusa (oil on canvas, end of the seventeenth century).
Above left: Title page of Bonifacio Bagatta’s Life of D. Carlo De Tomasi e Caro, Rome 1702. Above right: Title page from the Selected Religious Essays of Sister Maria Crocifissa, Girgenti 1704. Below left: Title page of Cardinal Giuseppe Maria Tomasi’s Ascetic Works, Ferrara 1735. Below right: Title page of St Giuseppe Maria Tomasi’s Institutiones theologicæ antiquorum patrum, Part Four, Rome 1769.
the upper territory of the barony of Montechiaro. The following year, Carlo – who was regarded as the firstborn because he issued second and so presumably was conceived first – was created Duke of Palma by Philip IV. In 1640 Carlo, the first of the “holy” Tomasis, took religious vows, and his twin Giulio succeeded him. And Giulio too, the “Holy Duke”, devoted himself to the greater glory of God and of his fiefdom. In 1659 his palace was transformed into a Benedictine convent, which his three daughters – Francesca, Isabella (the future Venerable Crocifissa) and Antonia – entered as novices. The “Holy Duke” gave Palma its status as a sacred city which is unique among all seventeenth-century Sicilian settlements.
Above: The leopard in an early eighteenth-century coat-of-arms.
In 1661, having received a papal dispensation, Giulio’s wife Rosalia Traina retired to the convent, and ten years later his youngest daughter, Alipia, also entered the convent. Finally Giulio himself – after having been made Prince of Lampedusa in 1667 by Mariana of Austria, Queen Regent of Spain during the minority of her son Charles II – retired to a cloistered life on the nearby Mount Calvario. Giuseppe, the firstborn, had already followed his uncle Carlo and become a Theatine monk, and from Rome acted as the intellectual and spiritual guide of the family in the distant city of Palma. It was he who commissioned the first hagiographies of the “holy” Tomasis. A liturgist, biblical philologist (he had learnt Hebrew from the Rabbi Mosè di Cave, whom he had converted to Christianity) and cardinal, he was beatified by Pius VII and later canonized by John Paul II. His brother Ferdinando, who had inherited the fiefdom, died in 1672 at the age of twenty-one. His wife Melchiorra Naselli had died a few months earlier due to complications after a Caesarean section. This operation took place in front of an assembly of the ducal court formed, for the most part, by priests and members of religious congregations. After a general prayer for the duchess, the duke
Giulio’s successor, Ferdinando II Maria, consolidated the family’s position in Palermo. In 1724 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, then ruler of Naples and Sicily, granted him the title of Grandee of Spain, and in 1743 he was sent to Messina as a royal envoy to deal with the emergency following an outbreak of the

himself ordered the surgeon to open the womb. The detailed chronicle of the proceedings is one of the most appalling descriptions from the days of the Counter-Reformation.

Rosalia Traina, the “Holy Duchess”, grandmother of the orphan Giulio, was then forced to leave the convent in order to rule the duchy and bring up the Tomasi heir. Giulio moved the family to Palermo. And with him, the mystical period of the family’s history in Palma came to an end.

A photograph of Giulio Fabrizio Tomasi, c.1860.
plague. Ferdinando was three times prefect (mayor) of Palermo. In 1746, during his second period of office, he dented the city’s finances with the expenses for the fireworks of Santa Rosalia.

In 1799, his grandson Giulio III Maria was also prefect of Palermo and manager of the theatre of Santa Lucia. The family always had a privileged relationship with the Church, and several of its members held high positions in the Order of Malta and in the city’s confraternities. In particular, they were often governors of the Compagnia della Pace (“Congregation of the Peace”). The Congregation’s meeting place was situated above the rampart of the Porta Termini, one of Palermo’s historic gates, which is where the Circolo Bellini, Palermo’s aristocratic club (founded in 1769), is located today.
In the nineteenth century, this relationship with the Church took a turn towards excessive piety, as shown by Prince Giulio’s grandson, Giulio Fabrizio, an amateur astronomer and the model for the protagonist of *The Leopard*. The diary of his son Giuseppe, the writer’s grandfather, reveals a constant coming and going of ecclesiastics in the observatory of the Colli, and a daily recital of the rosary and celebration of the Mass.

After Giulio Fabrizio’s death, it became apparent that the economic – and consequently social – decline of the family could not be arrested. When he died in 1885, Prince Giulio Fabrizio was survived by several children and left no will. The sons thought that a will did exist and that the mother and daughters had destroyed it – and that was the start of a lawsuit which went through all the main courts of law in the city. The dispute was ended in 1945 with an agreement arranged

Below: *Giulio Fabrizio Tomasi’s telescope (left) and a detail of his library in the Villa Lamпедusa ai Colli (right)*
Above left: Frontispiece of the 1854 edition of A. de Humboldt’s Cosmos, owned by Giulio Fabrizio Tomasi. Above right: The penultimate page of Lampedusa’s grandfather Giuseppe Tomasi’s journal, from the year 1858. Below: The diploma conferred on Giulio Fabrizio Tomasi by the Italian Society for the Advancement of the Sciences in 1875.
Above: Stefania Papè di Valdina and Giuseppe Tomasi, the writer’s paternal grandparents. Below: Giovanna Filangeri di Cutò (oil on canvas signed “PDG 1879”) and Lucio Mastrogiovanni Tasca, the writer’s maternal grandparents.