Caravaggio’s Maltese Inspiration *

John Gash

Caravaggio’s Maltese oeuvre and its influence on art on the island and elsewhere have been the subject of increasing scrutiny over the past sixty years. But the impact that Malta may have had on Caravaggio has only recently begun to be seriously considered. David Stone, in particular, has convincingly demonstrated not only how the great Beheading of St. John the Baptist in the oratory of St. John’s was conceived in response to the ritual and ideological requirements of the Knights, but also that minor aspects of its design were derived from an engraving of 1588 by Philippe Thomassin in the statute-book of the Order. The latter should come as no surprise, because Caravaggio was always very alert to the visual ideas he found in paintings, prints and sculptures. He never followed another artist’s composition slavishly, yet would adapt striking motifs or passages to his own ends. Indeed this practice was more frequent with him than has sometimes been recognized. It was pursued with a

* I am indebted to Pamela Willis, Keith Sciberras and Joe Galea-Naudi for their assistance during my research on this article.


3. For an interesting example of the influence on him of a Dürer print, see K. Hermann Fiore, “Caravaggio’s ‘Taking of Christ’ and Dürer’s woodcut of 1509”, *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXVII, no. 1102, pp.24-27; and for his inventive use of antique sculpture (despite the myth put about by Bellori and others that he totally rejected the antique in favour of nature), Sergio Benedetti, “Classical and Religious Influences in Caravaggio’s Painting”, in *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image*, exhibition catalogue, Boston/Chicago, 1999.
democracy of spirit during the course of his travels, making no distinction between major and minor artists, styles or periods. His sole consideration seems to have been the dramatic or emotional force, and potential applicability, of the motif.

Here I shall be drawing attention to two paintings seen by Caravaggio in Malta that seem to have stimulated his own pictorial imagination, and also speculating about the possible Maltese origins of a painting thought by a growing number of scholars to be by him: the Toothpuller in the Palazzo Pitti (Plate 7).

The two pictures that Caravaggio was inspired by are the triptych of the Lamentation over the Dead Christ, ascribed to the circle of the Netherlandish artist Jan van Scorel (1495-1562) (Museum of St.John’s co-Cathedral, Valletta); and the Flagellation of Christ (dated 1572) by the Florentine, Stefano Pieri (sacristy of St. John’s co-Cathedral) (Plates 1, 2 & 3). Caravaggio is bound to have known these works, since they were housed in prominent places in the Order’s public buildings - the former in the chapel of the Grandmaster’s Palace, the latter probably still in Caravaggio’s day over the altar of the chapel of the English Language in St. John’s, at the entrance to the Oratory. While he must have seen both pictures on a regular basis, and either immediately or gradually grasped their relevance to his own enterprise, he did not apply the ideas gleaned from them until after he had left the island and moved on to Sicily and back to Naples. Caravaggio was, in fact, blessed with an exceptionally good visual memory, but the lapse of time also had the beneficial result of subjecting the remembered motifs more fully to the transforming alchemy of his own imagination.

It is, on one level, only to be expected that Caravaggio would have appreciated an early Netherlandish painting like the Lamentation, with its sober, yet moving, realism - even if there are relatively few specific examples of such influence in his work that one could quote. Yet what fascinated him most here was not the realistic detail but the emotional charge carried by a particular device: that of the Mater Dolorosa’s face pressed up against that of her dead Son. For when, after his flight from Malta and brief residence in Syracuse, he came, in the first half of 1609, to paint one of the most memorable passages in his entire oeuvre - the face of Martha weeping over that of her dead brother, Lazarus, in the great altarpiece of the Raising of Lazarus for Giovanni Battista de’ Lazzari (Messina, Museo Regionale) (Plate 4, 5) - it was precisely this formulation that he sought to reinvent. Of course Caravaggio intensifies and sharpens the motif by inverting the faces of Martha and Lazarus into polar opposites (Life and Death - although death on the verge of being transformed once again by the Light of the World into life). And should any doubt remain about Caravaggio’s source, one has only to note the abbreviated structure of Lazarus’s face, which is a conscious reminiscence of the triangulated face of Christ in the Malta Lamentation. Indeed, one gets the impression that the slightly ‘primitive’ formal simplifications of the ‘van Scorel’ triptych were especially attractive to the sensibility of the late Caravaggio.

By contrast, it was to a more sophisticated style of painting that Caravaggio turned in connection with his Flagellation of Christ for the De Franchis (Di Franco) chapel in San Domenico Maggiore, Naples (now Capodimonte) (Plate 6). A good deal of ink has been spilt over whether the altarpiece was executed during Caravaggio’s first or second Neapolitan visit (1606-07 or 1609-10), with Roberto Longhi in 1959 influentially arguing on stylistic grounds in favour of the latter. The publication in 1977 by Vincenzo Pacelli of bills of payment from the patron, Tommaso de Franchis, to Caravaggio on 11 and 29 of May 1607 (for 250 and 40.09 ducats respectively) seemed, for a time, to settle the issue in favour of the earlier date bracket, even though the subject of the picture in question is not recorded. However, both Ferdinando Bologna and Pacelli himself have subsequently resurrected the debate, arguing that the Flagellation may well have been either completed or altered after Caravaggio’s move to Malta in July 1607. Indeed, x-rays taken in 1982 show that the kicking tormentor on the right has been painted over a complete, perhaps kneeling, figure in the middle distance, who seems to look lovingly at the suf-
Naples during Caravaggio’s Maltese sojourn now seems at least possible. Furthermore, unlike Bologna, Pacelli discerns no differences of handling between the right and left halves of the picture, thereby concluding that the work as we know it today was painted more or less during the same phase, even though reworked. And in this connection he notes that Caravaggio could have returned to Naples for the sale there of his two pictures, the Madonnna of the Rosary and Judith and Holofernes, in September 1607.

Whatever the case, it is highly likely, as I first argued in 1993, that Caravaggio painted the right-hand kicking figure as a result of seeing Stefano Pieri’s Flagellation in Malta. Stefano Pieri (1542-1629) was a Florentine Mannerist who probably executed his Flagellation for the Florentine Grand Master, Pietro del Monte, in 1572. His work is imbued with a Mannerist grace and élan that testify to its ultimate derivation from Sebastiano del Piombo’s picture of the same subject in San Pietro in Montorio, Rome (1521-24). But its dark background, striking tenebrism, and dramatic realism also betray the beginnings of the Florentine reform of painting, and would doubtless have struck a chord with Caravaggio. More crucially, the kicking pose of the rearmost of the two right-hand torturers very closely parallels that of the cognate figure in Caravaggio’s version. Even the positioning of his arms is comparable. (In the picture’s currently highly damaged and repainted state, it might seem at first glance as if the foreground figure is the kicking one, but a closer inspection makes it clear that the leg, in fact, belongs to his semi-concealed accomplice behind). The motif harks back to north European paintings and prints of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, but is absent in Sebastiano’s altarpiece, and is only intermittently deployed in the idealizing Italy of the sixteenth century. All of which increases the likelihood of Pieri’s figure having inspired Caravaggio.

Various possible scenarios suggest themselves: (A) Caravaggio had finished the original version of his Flagellation in June 1607, as the records of payment might suggest, but, having, seen Pieri’s picture in Malta, altered the right hand figure on a subsequent occasion - either fairly soon (if we assume that the July 1607 visit to the island was a brief, reconnaissance mission), or much later in 1609-10. If either were the case, one would need to account for the fact that the right-hand ‘patron’ figure on the original paint surface, as revealed by the x-radiograph, was done away with. (B) Although it is likely that the payments discovered by Pacelli refer to the Naples

10. E.g. the signed drawing by Lambert Lombard in the Musée d’Ansembourg, Liège, which contains both a kneeling donor and a kicking tormentor.
14. An interesting Italian sixteenth-century engraving of the school of Marcantonio Raimondi in the British Museum shows one of the torturers kicking Christ, but this time at stomach level (a traditional variant). It also includes a figure in the background kneeling down and tying up a bunch of birch twigs, comparable to the one in the left foreground of Caravaggio’s picture.
Flagellation, there is no proof that they do - and, if they do not, the likelihood of a 1609-10, post-Pierian execution is enhanced. (C) Alternatively, if the payments do relate to the project, it is even possible that Caravaggio had been advised of Pieri’s picture by some of his Hospitaller friends in Naples (or by the artist himself, since Pieri lived and worked in Rome during Caravaggio’s time there), and gone to view it by way of ‘research’.

The extent of the influence of Pieri’s image on Caravaggio’s is conjectural. But it is interesting to note that, in addition to the kicking motif, that of pulling Christ’s hair is common to both. Although the latter was not uncommon, the particular pose and demeanour of the left-hand, hair-grasping figure is remarkably similar in both pictures. And if, in the last resort, Caravaggio’s more concentrated and naturalistic representation, anchored in the study of life models, is more masterly and moving, though rather less fluent, than its Mannered counterpart, the catalytic effect of Pieri’s picture on the Lombard’s omnivorous imagination surely insists on being recognized.

If the Maltese artistic environment sparked off such reactions in Caravaggio’s mind, what about the wider environment? Did life on the island provide specific stimuli, as would be the case with Favray’s genre paintings a century and a half later? Conventional wisdom has always held that Caravaggio more or less abandoned genre painting with the beginnings of his success as a religious painter c.1600. But this is almost certainly an oversimplification generated by the random survival of images. And the growing grounds well of opinion in favour of the Florentine Toothpuller (Plate 7) as an authentic late work by Caravaggio may well yet overturn the old orthodoxy. For my money, there is a good likelihood that this damaged painting was executed by Caravaggio himself no earlier than the Maltese period, for it incorporates such a wide range of reminiscences of his own works from disparate locations as to make it more likely that it was painted by the master himself than by a peripatetic follower. It also had a decisive impact on northern Caravaggists such as Honthorst and Rombouts, who must have seen it in the Medici collection - in Honthorst’s case no later than 1620, when he returned to Utrecht. But the attribution is nonetheless a borderline one. The ‘sources’ include the Martyrdom of St. Matthew (Rome, Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi) for the raised arm of the patient and the pose of the semi-nude man to the right; the Madonna of the Rosary (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) and the lost Virgin and Child with the Infant St. John, both of which were probably painted in Naples in 1606-07, for the back view of the little boy leaning on the table in the left foreground; the old crone type of figure found in Caravaggio’s Roman Judith and Holofernes (Rome, Galleria Nazionale, Palazzo Barberini) and his Colonna estates Supper at Emmaus (Milan, Brera, 1606) for the wrinkled, bug-eyed woman at the far right; and the portrait of the Florentine Knight, Antonio Martelli (Florence, Palazzo Pitti), which was probably painted in Malta in 1608 and taken back to Florence the following year, for the figure of near-identical pose and demeanour third from the left.

But where, if it is a Caravaggio, was the Toothpuller painted - in Malta, Sicily, or Naples during Caravaggio’s last year? Although the picture is very damaged, and even though technical arguments cannot prove conclusive, there are marked technical similarities with the works done by Caravaggio in Malta. Erich Schleier long ago drew attention to the fact that the picture is very close to the Pitti Portrait of a Knight (Antonio Martelli),17 while the blotchy highlights also bear direct comparison with those of the St. Jerome now also in the oratory of St. John’s. And here I should like to offer one or two further speculations (no more) about its possible Maltese genesis.

The Toothpuller is partly inspired by yet another Netherlandish source, Lucas van Leyden’s engraving of the same subject of 1523, which furnished Caravaggio with the idea for the slouch hat worn by his rather comic dentist with puffed out cheeks. Indeed Caravaggio may have had his attention drawn to this print by Vasari’s high praise of it as a masterpiece of naturalism.18 But, as always with Caravaggio, the individual figures give the appearance of having been in large part painted direct from life, which in turn raises the question of whether this is merely a staged reenactment, or whether it bears some closer relation to an actual toothpulling situation?

The extensive practice of medicine at a high level in the Knights’ Sacra Infermeria in Valletta is well known. But did the system in Caravaggio’s day include dentistry, as it certainly did in the eighteenth century?19 That there were Maltese dentists in the first half of the seventeenth century is, however, confirmed by the case of the doctor Joseph Cossaus, who chose the subject of dental surgery for one of his graduation theses at the university of Montpellier in 1636.20 In addition to such a broad circumstantial possibility, the appearance of two of the figures in the picture may reflect the Maltese scene. We have already noted that the dignified-looking man third from left

has echoes of the portrait of Fra Antonio Martelli. But the bald-headed figure next to him, who appears to be wearing pantaloons, might well be based on some Turkish slave. He is the only totally bald figure in Caravaggio's oeuvre, although some of his followers, such as Manfredi and Cecco, did replicate the type - possibly under the influence of this very picture. But Caravaggio was interested in reality rather than types. Certain surviving images of Moslems from the 16th/17th centuries, such as those engraved in Nicolao de' Nicolai's Le Navigazioni et Viaggi, fatti nella Turchia of 1580, do suggest analogies with the figure in question - whether it be the shaven head of a Turkish Dervish or the pantaloons worn by two Moorish pilgrims to Mecca (Plates 8 & 9). On the other hand, the semi-clad figure who leans forward from the bottom-right is sporting a kind of undress that would not be inappropriate to a patient, or even member of staff, in the Infermeria come a Maltese summer!

Should the hypothesis of a Maltese origin for the Toothpuller turn out to be correct, there would be no shortage of potential Florentine patrons from among the ranks of the Knights. And Caravaggio certainly had links with their community. Apart from the portrait of Antonio Martelli, he also painted in 1608 the Sleeping Cupid for Fra Francesco dell’Antella, Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt’s Florentine Secretary for Italy. But the Toothpuller was recorded in the Grand Ducal collection in Florence as early as 1638, and had probably already been there for some time, hinting at the possibility of a direct Medici commission. Recent, or relatively recent, Medici Knights Hospitaller in 1608 were (with dates of accession):- Francesco (1585), Attilio (1591); Alberto (1591); Don Antonio, natural son of Grand Duke Francesco (1595); and Pietro (15 May 1598). If such an important connection was indeed forged by Caravaggio during his Maltese interlude, it would have followed on logically from his earlier affiliation during the 1590s with Cardinal Francesco del Monte, representative in Rome of the Grand Duke Ferdinando de’ Medici.


Plate 1: School of Jan van Scorel, Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Magdalene. Triptych. Panel. 119 x 171 cm. (including frames). Museum of St. John’s co-cathedral, Valletta.
Plate 2: School of Jan van Scorel, Lamentation. Central panel. 104.2 x 71 cm.


Plate 7: Caravaggio (?), *The Toothpuller*. Canvas. 139.5 x 194.5 cm. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.
Plate 8: Anon, *Dervicio religioso Turco*. Engraving in Nicolo de' Nicolai, "Le Navigationi etc.", 1580.

Plate 9: Anon, *Peregrini Mori tornando dalla Mecha*. Engraving in Nicolo de' Nicolai, "Le Navigationi etc.", 1580.