A VIEW OVER WATER:  
THE QALA SHIP GRAFFITI IN CONTEXT

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‘Intro lo cavo de Montela e Miciaro si è una chaleta soto una gliestia de Sancta Maria.’ With those words, a fifteenth-century portulan establishes the Immaculate Conception chapel at Qala as a landmark in the maritime landscape of Gozo, from where one can view the western reaches of the Gozo channel, and where maritime graffiti of some interest are also found. Graffiti are usually defined as mural scribbings or drawings done by idlers. It is quite ironic that while modern graffiti are regarded as acts of vandalism which deface monuments and buildings, those of antiquity and of the not so distant past are generating an ever increasing volume of studies which try to shed light on the aim and meaning of these designs, and maybe establish a link with the history of the people responsible for their doing.

Malta is no exception. It has its own not inconsiderable list of such incisions in stone and much pioneering work has been done by Joseph Muscat an authority on several aspects of maritime history. In a recent work published on the subject Muscat lists no less than 80 sites in Malta and Gozo where graffiti have been discovered. It is immediately clear that while one finds a varied repertoire of different designs, the greatest number represent various kinds of sailing vessels. This preoccupation with maritime matters could hardly be otherwise considering that Malta depended so heavily on trade with foreign ports for its survival and as such a number of Maltese and Gozitans were in direct contact with the sea and with the perils it entailed. As has been said by others elsewhere, these graffiti were neither intended as works of art nor as precise representations of maritime architecture. They are, however, interesting in being the most direct evidence - pictorial in nature - drawn by the people themselves.

To date no written records have been found which in any way refer to the habit or custom of incising graffiti or to who did them. It would therefore make sense that in studying this phenomenon one adopts the methods of the prehistorian

who tries to interpret his finds by looking at their context: the monument first, and its landscape second. I think that a detailed consideration of both the context, where these graffiti occur, and of documentary sources if available can allow us to move beyond stereotyped explanations, or to strengthen current hypotheses.

The trend so far has been to treat the graffiti in iconographic isolation, with little if any consideration being given to the site and monument. The purpose of the present contribution will therefore be twofold: to catalogue a set of graffiti which have not been recorded as a group till now and which are disappearing at a rapid rate due to the effects of weathering. Secondly, it will be an attempt to delve deeper into the human element which after all is responsible for their doing, and while in no way claiming to have discovered the identity of the graffitiists, draw what one hopes some interesting observations.

The chapel in question is situated in the open end of a three-sided bowl-like depression significantly called il-Halq, meaning the mouth, overlooking the North Comino channel.1 When one takes into consideration the siting of some of the rural chapels including this one, one cannot help but project what an archaeologist – Reuben Grima – says about the siting of the prehistoric temples, namely that these monuments were intended to mediate the boundary between the world of the land and the world of the sea and so to give cultural meanings to that landscape. or as another archaeologist Nathaniel Cutajar remarks, show the approaching seafarer that the island is a bulwark of Christianity.2 The legend associated with the building of the chapel,3 that a figure dressed in white caused the building material to disappear from the intended building site, within the village centre, and find its way to a deserted location, where the chapel was eventually built, appears to be an important legitimating factor for the cultic relevance of the chapel. In the words of Harvey, sacred stories ‘help to transform certain sites and physical features ritually, and they serve to anchor collective memory in the landscape’.4

The origins of the chapel itself are quite obscure. De Soldanis himself in his Gozo Antico e Moderno (mid-18th c.) confesses that he could not discover the date in which it was built,5 while Magri claims that the existence of a chapel at the place goes back to Norman times.6 Myths and legends apart, the oldest reference I could find was in the fifteenth-century portal that quoted above which mentions a

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7. E. Magri, Cenni storici sul santuario nazionale di Santa Maria tal Qala in Gozo, Malta 1905, 5.
9. A. Buttigieg, Grafiti il-Qala, Malta 1980, 8.
12. E. Magri, Cenni Storici, 8.
church dedicated to Santa Maria situated between Mgarr and Wied ir-Rihan on top of a bay looking south-east towards Comino.  

In his pastoral visit of 1575 Dusina writes that parts of the chapel including the door were in ruins and was declared profane until the necessary repairs took place. This desolation is hardly surprising considering the number of corsair attacks to which Gozo was subjected as the soft underbelly of Malta. Stanley Fiorini in his seminal paper on the repopulation of Gozo lists no less than six such attacks in the space of six years, (in 1544, 1545, 1546, 1547, 1550) culminating in the raid of 1551 by the corsair Dragut.  

However, the recovery seems to have been quite rapid for in 1592 bishop Gargallo mentions that the chapel was again enjoying great devotion. In 1615 the chapel was still functioning and bishop Cagliero changed the dedication from one to the Assumption to the present one of the Assumption and by 1640 the chapel interior was covered with ex-voto offerings. In his Descrittione di Malta (1647) Abela clearly underlines its return to cultic status when he refers to the chapel as 'la venerabile chiesa nel Gozo, della divotissima, e miracolosa Madonna Nominata della Cala' and that, 'a lei ricorrono con viva fede [...] non solo i Gozitani, ma i Maltesi ancora.' He continues to say that such devotion was strengthened by the ancient belief that a hermit of saintly life, San Kerrew, was buried under the chapel and whose tomb was marked by the 'forame, o buco allogato in un lato del pavimento [...] che nel di sopra haveva gia' un cecato.'  

Hagiographic accounts, like that about San Kerrew, serve to instil a local identity and memory, with references to landscape. In the story Kerrew was living in Malta, however the Maltese did not appreciate a saint in their midst. In fact they decided to provoke him and later stoned him. When the saint saw the hard heartedness of the Maltese he prophesied several negative events that were soon to befall the island, then he spread his cloak on the water and floated miraculously across the Gozo channel. He landed at Hondoq ir-Rummien and made his way to a cave near the chapel where he lived for a while and where he was venerated as a saintly man by the people of Gozo.  

The story might be an attempt to show that the Gozitans were more god-fearing people than their neighbours the Maltese, while also sanctifying a known landscape from where the saint makes his passage to his final resting place.

17. Bishop's Curia Gozo. Pastoral Visit Balguener 1635, f.11.
18. G. F. Abela, Della Descrittione di Malta isola nel mare Siciliano con le sue antichità ed altre notitiae, Malta 1647, 386.
19. D. C. Harvey, 245. This theme is the subject of another paper being prepared by the author.

Seeing that the chapel enjoyed such a widespread reputation as a shrine, it is a natural progression that people involved in one of the most hazardous occupations of the time, seafaring, and who by the nature of their work tend to be intensely superstitious are going to establish a strong link with such cultic centres. Bishop Alpheran already shows this link when he mentions in 1736 chains among the numerous ex-voto offerings then present in the chapel, and of which today no trace is left.

At this point a consideration of the actual graffiti creates a link between the chapel and the maritime aspect. I must say here that while describing what I have seen scratched on the walls I will attempt to identify the typology of the ships where possible making use of Muscat's excellent frame of reference. Since lacking wide iconographic experience I will certainly not claim to have the last say in the matter.

The bulk of the graffiti can be found on the North-east (left hand) wall of the chapel while some others can be found on the South-east (back) wall (figs 3, 2b). The ship graffiti are 26 in number, and survive in varied degrees of preservation. In size the graffiti vary from 7 cm to 40 cm and most of them can be found on the fourth or fifth stone course or at the level of the chest of a standing person, each on a separate block of stone. For the present purpose I will group the graffiti in 3 categories, and give a general overview of each with reference to specific examples. The first category shows those designs with rudimentary shaped hulls, the second shows those designs with clearer seaway lines, and in the third one finds strange or very basic hulls.

The following graffiti 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 show vessels with hulls that are either a rough semicircular affair such as 2, 5, 9 or with an unrealistic very high stern such as 1, 6, 8 (fig 4). Although they lack the detail necessary for identification they bring to mind the Gozo boat. All give an indication of a lateen rig, with graffiti 5 sporting a flag on the stern with a cross on it. Graffiti 1 and 6 have their bows completely obliterated while the sails on graffiti 4 look as if they have been displaced forward with the foresail bigger than the mainsail instead of the other way round. Vertical lines intended to show the cloths of the sails can be noted on graffiti 1 and 3, while their hulls are badly if not completely deteriorated. Graffiti 7 shows an elongated vessel with 2 masts and a flag post and no indication of sails.

The second group of graffiti 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 show hulls, which are better drawn (fig 5). Graffiti 10 and 16 show which might be two galleons.

Fig. 3. North-East wall of the Chapel

Fig. 4. Graffiti on the Chapel
Vessel 10 has a hull with high freeboard and a high poop deck at the stern. It also has a prominent forecastle and a beak-like spur at the bows. As far as rigging is concerned it is conspicuous by its absence. Pitting which could indicate gun ports or was simply intended as decoration is present. A similar design to this is graffito 16, with much the same characteristics except that there is no evidence of a raised forecastle and that one can see a spread square sail on the foremast. Graffito 12 could be a galley with a long slim hull with shallow freeboard, a high poop, a flag with a cross on it and two masts; however, the lack of a rambate at the forward end makes one speculate if this could be a brigantine. In fact the following graffiti 7, 13, 14, 15, and 17, all seem to be brigantines, showing a foremost with a prominent tilt to the bows and a high poop, while designs 13 and 15 exhibit the greatest amount of detail they are also very faint due to weathering.

Graffito 11 shows an interesting vessel. It features a large hull, which measures 29 cm despite missing its bows. It has a very high freeboard with a poop deck on the stern, and decorated with pitting which could be gun ports. It looks remarkably like a vassello but no rigging is visible.

The third group of graffiti 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26 show some strange or incomplete designs (fig. 6). Graffito 18 is the only vessel that has what could be oars. Graffiti 19, 21, and 23 have an indication of masts while 20, 24, 25 are just hulls. The vessel depicted on graffito 22, while clearly and deeply incised, showing a long flat hull with a very low freeboard and a cabin at the stern, bears no resemblance to any sailing vessel of the 17th or 18th century. It brings to mind the shape of a barge. Graffito 26 shows a square-rigged vessel with a roundish stern post, huge roundish hull, and disproportionately small masts and sails. Triangular pennants are flying from the mast-heads while a large flag can be seen on the stern post.

However, I would like to argue that the tie between the chapel and seafarers presumed by the location of the chapel and the ship graffiti is turned from probability to a certainty from documentary sources pertaining to the period 1730 to 1763. This evidence is contained in three registers recording the administration of the procura of the same chapel. The first one covers the period 1730 to 1734, the second, the period from 1747 to 1751 and the third, the period from 1751 to 1763. For the purpose of convenience they will be referred to as register number 1, 2, and 3 respectively.24

These slim files record the sources of income and expenditure incurred in the running of the sanctuary. What makes interesting reading is the fact that the bulk of the income was derived from elenosine or alms collected from the various barche and bergantini de Gozo. Thus in the first register one finds that more than 56 scudi were collected from boats while only 28 scudi were collected from other sources.25

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in the second register one finds a total of 123 scudi and 7 grani collected from on board boats,\(^{26}\) and in the third 333 scudi one tori and 5 grani also collected from on board the boats\(^{27}\).

The names of the various padroni are listed, with an indication as to the kind of vessel they owned, either a barca (boat) or brigantine. Of particular interest is one Ludovico Dandalona\(^{28}\). The parish records of St George reveal that he was the son of Michele Dandalona.\(^{29}\) Michele was a padrone living in Cospicua. After the death of his first wife Grazia in 1689 he moved to Gozo and on 30 September 1691 married Orsolica Farrugia.\(^{30}\) On 28 March 1696 their third child, Domenico Ludovico was born.\(^{31}\) From his union with Orsolica, Michele had more than eight other children. On 30 April 1724 Ludovico aged 28 married Orsola Mercieca at the matrici church in Gozo. Like his father Michele, Ludovico became padrone of one of the Gozo brigantines. The 1730s seem to have been the hey-day for Ludovico’s activity. The chapel registers lists more than 20 names of different owners of which at least five, Ludovico Dandalona, Giacomo Magro, Michele Azzopard, Antonio Mizzi and Pietro Veneziano, are listed as owners of brigantines. Together with padron Giacomo Magro, Dandalona appears on more then one occasion in the records of the Gozo universitas as a carrier of grain from Licata.\(^{32}\) His, also the name that appears repeatedly as carrier of diverse goods, bells, wood, and munitions, between Malta and Gozo.\(^{33}\) His prosperity might be further corroborated if one can prove that a considerable area of land, incidentally sited near the Immaculate Conception chapel and to this day known as Ta’ Dandalona belonged to him or his family (fig. 1).

To conclude I should say that after a consideration of all the above factors there is no doubt in my mind that these graffiti were religious offerings done by the seafarers. One also notes that most of these graffiti are rudimentary in presentation and not in a very well preserved state. However their interest lies in the fact that they served as a starting point for the study of the interaction of the landscape, site and the people who could have scratched them. They establish a connection with the Gozitan seafarers whose past fortunes and activities should be explored further and thus shed more light on the early modern social-economic history of the island.

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33. National Archives Gozo/Universitas Galloruni/12, 1730-31, ff.6, 11v, 1731-32, f.8v.
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