THE QORMI PALA D’ALTARE AND ARTISTIC PATRONAGE IN MALTA DURING THE 15TH AND EARLY 16TH CENTURIES

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The period between approximately the early 15th century and the first three decades of the 16th is normally regarded as a time of grave economic depression and social insecurity. Such an impression seems to be borne out by the surviving documents which complain repeatedly of the rapacity of corrupt crown officials, the exploitation of feudal lords and powerful local notables, over taxation, pillaging raids by the terrible Hafids of Tunisia and piratical incursions by Genoese and Calabrian ships as well as of natural calamities such as plague and drought.

Perhaps the most eloquent of the capitolli or petitions that the Maltese sent to the King or his Viceroy in Sicily was that of 1466 in which they gave a probably, purposely exaggerated picture of dejection:

\[ \text{quista insola, they bemoaned, è quasi unu parvu scglectu situatu in mezu mari, remotu undique da omni succursu et refrigeriu.} \]

Nonetheless, inspite of the apparently serious distress, the period also witnessed an unexpected boom in church buildings and a remarkable flowering of artistic patronage. The Cathedral at Mdina was enlarged into a cruciform shape in 1419 and in 1520 it was given a new painted and gilt timbered ceiling when a clerestory was built on the nave arcades; the mendicant friars who established themselves at

\[ \text{1. The best accounts of this period are the several writings of Anthony T. Luttrell particularly} \]

\[ \text{"Approaches to Medieval Malta" in Medieval Malta – Scenes on Malta before the Knights, London 1973, pp. 48 – 70 and the various contributions of Godfrey Wettinger to Malta Historica, Proceedings of History Week and other specialised publications which are of seminal importance and contain the} \]

\[ \text{essential documentary references and bibliography. H. Bresc's "The 'Secrezia' and the Royal} \]

\[ \text{Patrimony in Malta 1240 – 1459" (Medieval Malta pp. 126 – 162) is also of vital interest and provides} \]

\[ \text{the necessary economic background.} \]

\[ \text{2. References and details in Luttrell, Approaches, Bresc, op.cit. and Roberto Valenti who published} \]

\[ \text{several of the relevant documents in Archivio Storico di Malta (V-XIII Rome 1934 – 1942). The} \]

\[ \text{Monroy incident of 1426 – 27 which is often mentioned as the turning point in the islanders' struggles} \]

\[ \text{and sacrifices to achieve a measure of political liberty is re-dimensionised in Godfrey Wettinger "The} \]

\[ \text{Pawning of Malta to Monroy", Malta Historica, VII no. 3 (1978), pp. 263 – 283.} \]

\[ \text{3. Text in Valenti, in Archivio Storico di Malta, X, p. 70.} \]

\[ \text{4. See especially Godfrey Wettinger "Artistic Patronage in Malta: 1418 – 1538" in Ma millieri: A} \]

\[ \text{Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings (ed. A. Luttrell), Malta 1976, pp. 108 – 113.} \]

\[ \text{5. On Mdina Cathedral see Mario Buhagiar, "Medieval Churches in Malta", Medieval Malta, op.cit.,} \]

\[ \text{pp. 178 – 179.} \]
Rabat and built enlarged churches and convents;6 and several of the twelve cappelle, or parish churches, mentioned in the 1436 report7 were structurally modified as happened, for example, at Zurrieq, Qormi, Siggiewi, Zejtun and Bir Miftuh.8 More remarkable still was the great quantity of small churches, many of them apparently votive buildings, that were built or rebuilt both in the casali and in remote country districts; by 1530 these seem to have numbered around forty!9

The few snippets of information so far unearthed about artistic patronage are even more revealing in that they often point to an unexpected sophistication in the choice of artists and workshops that necessitated contacts not only with nearby Sicily but also with the Italian mainland and, possibly, even further afield. Some of the more relevant documents have been published and discussed by Dr. Godfrey Wettinger10 but there is still much scope for further research both by the late medieval specialist historian and by the art critic.

Mdina Cathedral had, as might be expected, the most impressive works. They included the great pala or retable of St. Paul which seems to be the work of a painter in the immediate entourage of Luis Borassa (1360-1426) who ... an oblong panel with scenes of the Dormition of the Virgin and St. Michael which is strongly Valencian in style;11


7. On the Cappelle and the 1436 Report see A. Luttrell, "Le origini della parrocchia a Malta" in St. Catherine, op.cit., pp. 189-190 and "Late Medieval Marian Art in Malta", op.cit., vol. 3. 9 n.23.


11. Genevieve Bautier-Brisc, op.cit., pp. 102 - 103; Mario Buhagiar, St. Catherine, op.cit., pp. 189 -190 and "Late Medieval Marian Art in Malta" in Mario Buhagiar (Ed.) Marian Art During the Middle Ages in Malta and Millieri, op.cit., pp. 97 - 104.

12. Mario Buhagiar, "Late Medieval Marian Art", op.cit., p.3.


14. Hanso W. Krofi, Domenico Gagini e Werkzeit, Munich 1972, pp. 55,244, pp. 221 - 233. The font is said to have been commissioned by Bishop Vajqarnera.


17. The bell is still extant. It is mentioned in a text of 1645 reproduced by Alfredo Mifsud in La Diocesi ii (1917 - 1918), pp. 76 - 77.


19. Ibid., pp. 110, 117n.33 and idem Burials in Maltese Churches", op.cit., p. 40.


24. The bell is still extant. It is mentioned in a text of 1645 reproduced by Alfredo Mifsud in La Diocesi ii (1917 - 1918), pp. 76 - 77.


26. Mario Buhagiar, St. Catherine, op.cit., pp. 189 -190 and "Late Medieval Marian Art in Malta" in Mario Buhagiar (Ed.) Marian Art During the Middle Ages in Malta and Millieri, op.cit., pp. 97 - 104.

27. Mario Buhagiar, "Late Medieval Marian Art", op.cit., p.3.


29. Mario Buhagiar, St. Catherine, op.cit., pp. 190 -191; "Late Medieval Marian Art", p. 4.


32. The bell is still extant. It is mentioned in a text of 1645 reproduced by Alfredo Mifsud in La Diocesi ii (1917 - 1918), pp. 76 - 77.
Close ties were meanwhile maintained with the Gagini Messina workshop and with the Messina School of painters that revolved round the great Antonello da Messina. In 1504 the Franciscan Minor Observants signed a contract with Antonello Gagini for a marble statue of the Madonna and Child which survives in their Rabat Church and carries on the pedestal the partially legible signature of Antonello and the date 1504. This statue which is mentioned in a will of 1553 published by Wertinger served as a model for another Madonna that Antonello Gagini produced shortly afterwards for the church of Santa Maria della Grazia at Catanzaro. Another work stylistically related to the Messina workshop of the Gagini is the white marble statue of St. Agatha in the Church of the saint at Rabat. This polychromy had two main panels (which still survive) representing, respectively the Lamentation for Christ and the Madonna and Child Enthroned. The other panels depicted St. Paul, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Francis of Assisi, Bishop St. Ludwig, St. Agatha, St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. George, St. Lucy; while on the predella (which was inscribed and dated) the Salvator Mundi was surrounded by the Apostles. Another important pala d'altare of unknown authorship and provenance somehow found its way to the parish church of the village of Qormi which had been either rebuilt or structurally altered in 1456 during the time of parish priest Don Giglio Lombardo. The pala which has long been dismembered was made up of at least four panels: a large central Lamentation for Christ, a St. George, a St. Gregory and a Crucifixion. Stylistic considerations suggest that it also had a predella but of this there is no documentary evidence and (if it ever existed) it must have been lost a long time ago.

The history of this pala is a complicated one. It may, possibly, be identified with the icona mentioned in the Dusina Report of 1575 when it was exhibited for verification above the tabernacle on the chancel altar. A few years later in 1588 it was referred to as an icona cum Imagini Jhesu Christi et Virginis Mariæ. Subsequent visitation reports describe it in greater detail and it seems to have remained the main

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22. The signature appears on the plinth which has a main relief of St. Francis receiving the stigmata and half figures of St. Paul and St. Francis of Assisi. The plinth now forms part of the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts. The statue was commissioned from the artist on 23rd February 1504 (Giocondo di Marco, I Gagini e la scultura in Sicilia nel secolo XV e XVI, Palermo 1880 - 1883, vol. II, p. 69 and ibid. vol. I). See also Vincenzo Bonello in V, Bonello / J. A. Cauchi, Pauline Centenary Exhibition - Sacred Art in Malta, Malta 1978, pp. 98 - 99 and idem, St. Agatha: An Archaeological Study of the Ancient Monuments and St. Agatha’s Building Complex: Crypt, Catacombs, Church and Museum, Malta 1983, p. 83n) an apparently contemporary copy of the deed registering a part payment to Antonello de Saliba, in the Malta provincial archives, Ms. 1, p. 3: Missenae: XX Novembris, 7. Indice: 1517. Nobilis Antonellos Rustica Civis saevisse sponso commercio esse recepisse et habuisse ab honorabili Johanni Zami Manni, ut procuratore Ecclesiae sui conventus Sanctae Mariae de Iesu eiusdem Civitatis Mediolanensi usum et iuris vocamus: sunt ad complimentum uniam quinquagesimam: ut quo dictis Conventis iuven um agilibus Antonello invigari, pro factura et constructione cotidum, quae pro dicto Convento. Itaque ut dicat apparet de praemissis in actis publicis proprio sponso Antonello a dicto convento, ut notarii stipulantes, quo terum se contentum et satisfactum de sumo dicto debeo. Cuius ... voluit et oppo conventum et societas interserit notariis in predicamentum factum et factum sumi soluisse cresce se mulli se nulius: solus et unius generis, de praesenti contractu in usu robere pro eisdem. Ipsius Johannis procuratorius nomine quo supra, similia confirmatorium est ad reenem nobili Antonello recepisse et habuisse dictum sumam anno duu. Et proponens se ad invicem contractandum et quod omnia eam sub ponere obligando, habendo ecc. et juris fiat in forma commonis.


Plate 2

a) Qormi, Parish Church of St. George, CRUCIFIXES, tempera on wood.
Photos: John Frendo.

b) Qormi, Parish Church of St. George, CRUCIFIXES, tempera on wood.
Photos: John Frendo.

Plate 3

a) Qormi, Museum of the Parish Church of St. George, ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON, tempera on wood.

b) Qormi, Museum of the Parish Church of St. George, POPE ST. GREGORY ACCOMPANIED BY A FEMALE SAINT, tempera on wood.
Photos: John Frendo.
The pala was then (apparently) partially dismembered and hung in the vestry where it remained until about 1651 when the panel of the Lamentation for Christ and those of St. Gregory and St. George were reassembled to form a triptych which became the altarpiece of an altar that had recently been set up in the north transept, in honour of the Virgin of Sorrows. In 1850 the reredos of this altar was refashioned and the old pala was substituted by a new canvas of the Pietà commissioned from the painter Antonio Falzon (1805-65). This move must, however, have provoked considerable public displeasure because after only a few years, the new painting was removed and, on the instructions of Bishop Gaetano Pace Forno, the central Lamentation for Christ of the late medieval pala (now shorn of the side panels) was reinstated as the altarpiece of the Pietà altar where it is still an object of considerable veneration.

Stylistically the Qormi Pala is a rather bewildering mixture of Italo-Byzantine and late Gothic elements which was, possibly, commissioned from a North-Italian workshop active in the second half of the 15th century. It is a work of considerable sophistication and iconographical interest and it is, to say the least, odd how it found its way into the church of a remote village such as Qormi must have been in the 15th and early 16th centuries. Works of comparable artistic merit were only produced for the more affluent town churches and it is probable that the Qormi Pala was commissioned, in the first place, by one of the rich convent churches of Rabat and that it only found its way to Qormi at a subsequent date.

On the central panel, the Virgin, accompanied by Mary of Magdala and John the Evangelist, receives into her lap the dead body of Christ, as she sits at the foot of the cross, while fretted against the background are the figures of Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and Veronica who hold passion symbols. The iconography of the sorrowful Virgin who presses her cheek against the cheek of her dead Son seems to have been copied straight from a Byzantine repository and it finds echoes in several important Byzantine works executed between the 12th and 16th centuries such as the well-known mural of Lamentation for Christ in the church of St. Panteleimon at Nerez in Macedonia. The treatment of the background (which looks like a tapestry hanging) and of the secondary figures is, on the other hand, in a purely International Gothic idiom and it is painted with a characteristic passion for extreme refinement, courtly elegance and love for exquisite patterns, intense colours and use of gold leaf. It is indeed a pity that such a beautiful work has suffered so extensively from inept restoration.

The Crucifix which now hangs above the choir altar beneath Matthias Preti’s painting of the Martyrdom of St. George is Byzantinesque in inspiration but Italianate in execution and the sinuous figure of Christ points to a Gothic influence. Also of Gothic inspiration is the blood stained skull on the pedestal supporting the cross which bears the four evangelical symbols. Similar crucifixes were common in the late Middle Ages and in the Early Renaissance Period and examples can be seen in the collections of the principal European Museums as well as in old established churches in Italy and elsewhere.

The Crucifix was probably the crowning panel of the Qormi Pala which deserves much better recognition as one of the masterpieces of late medieval art surviving in Malta.

In 1919-1920 the panel of The Deposition was restored by the painter Lazzaro Pisani (1850-1932). The work was criticised by Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969) in a long article in the newspaper Malta (19th May 1920) in which he severely rebukes the Qormi church authorities for the irreparable damage they were perpetuating in the parish church of St. George and in the church of Santa Marija tal-Ha’s through misguided restoration works. Bonello’s ire was provoked by the projected destruction of the richly carved altar reredoses in the parish church but he also took the opportunity to comment on some of the historical relics and works of art in the two churches among them The Deposition and the panels of St. George and St. Gregory.

Appendix

In 1919-1920 the panel of The Deposition was restored by the painter Lazzaro Pisani (1850-1932). The work was criticised by Vincenzo Bonello (1891-1969) in a long article in the newspaper Malta (19th May 1920) in which he severely rebukes the Qormi church authorities for the irreparable damage they were perpetuating in the parish church of St. George and in the church of Santa Marija tal-Ha’s through misguided restoration works. Bonello’s ire was provoked by the projected destruction of the richly carved altar reredoses in the parish church but he also took the opportunity to comment on some of the historical relics and works of art in the two churches among them The Deposition and the panels of St. George and St. Gregory.

35. Details in Buhagiar, “Xoghtijiet ta’ Art”, pp. 63-64. See Appendix.
36. This famous work is illustrated in David Talbot Rice, Byzantine Art (Penguin Books) 1968, pp. 254, 266. For other parallels see ibid., pp. 273, 276, 310, 499.
Pope St. Gregory. Presumably unaware of the pastoral Visitations reports, and basing his conclusion on purely stylistic considerations, he apparently did not suspect that the three panels formed part of the same pala and he wrongly assigned The Deposition to the 14th century. He also mistook the St. Gregory for a St. Elmo. What annoyed him most in the restoration of The Deposition was the, reputedly, unrestrained use of glittering gold leaf in the haloes of the sacred figures that people the scene:

Colpisce, pure nella chiesa, il lucchione dei diademi ridorati di fresco, di buon oro, su di un’annneria tavola trecentesca, recentemente rinnovata. In una sacrestia interna giacciono due tavole del Sec. XV di grande interesse storico ed artistico: una rappresenta in armatura il santo guerriero protettore del villaggio; l’altra ricorda il fonte quattrocento quando la giurisdizione di questo casale arrivava all’estrema punta della lingua di terra ove oggi sorge la Valletta, perché rappresenta il santo protettore dei naviganti al quale era dedicata una chiesuola in guisa di promontorio oggi occupato dal castello omonimo. Sono anneriti e hanno i diademi di oro pallido; fra non molto però splenderanno rinnovati e ridorati per bene.

Lazzaro Pisani took exception to this criticism and by way of justification for his intervention he published the following highly interesting restoration report in the Malta (27th May 1920):

Questa antichissima tavola a tempera, naturalmente in principio formava un bellissimo trittico, da certi buchi ... la pittura totalmente slaccata ed accorticciata a guisa di foglie di spina cadenti; la testa della Vergine addolorata ...

40. The identification of this saint with St. Gregory is based on iconographical considerations but the visitation reports give conflicting names: Visitatio Gargallo 1601, f. 189 and Visitatio Artina 1671–74, t. 246v, St. Gregory; Visitatio Gargallo 1588, f. 40: St. Elmo; Visitatio Molina 1679: St. Nicholas.

41. Bonello means Fort St. Elmo. The belief that the fort stands on the site of a church dedicated to St. Elmo does not seem to be supported by documentary evidence.

42. Bonello’s fears were unfounded because the two panels were happily not tampered with.

43. Miss Maria Pisani kindly drew my attention to this report.

44. Pisani was apparently unaware of the panel of the crucifixus which at the time was still in the store room of the Confraternity of the Virgin of Consolation (Mario Buhagiar, Xoghiitt tal-Arti, op.cit., p. 43), he, therefore, assumed the pala to have been a triptych and not a polyptych as it almost certainly was.

con l’aurorola staccata in forma del cavo di una mano, il resto per più di due terzi, oltre diversi guasti, rigonfio da fare parere la pittura maggiore della tavola su cui era dipinta: condizione credo da fare impensierire qualunque abile restauratore. Chiamato per restaurare tanta rovina non voleva accettare l’incarico; poi immaginandone “senza garantire la riuscita”, di staccare la pittura dalla tavola su tela, cedette alle istanze del M.R. Cappellano e del Sec. Procuratore. Ma questa operazione incominciata tanto bene la dovette fermare per causarsi ribalitare di grossi chiodi e di spugnoli irritate.

Tentai un’ultima e mi è riuscita a meraviglia ciò di fare infinite incisioni nelle parti rigonfie per diminuire il volume ritenendo la pittura antica su pezzettine di carta velina e poi aderirlo alla tavola con pasta elastica nuovamente; consolidai bene le tavole di dietro colmandoli le tarlature riducendole di un sol pezzo dando in ultimo all’omn una tonalaccio per impedire l’azione della diversità di temperatura. Di più trovai nella pittura che il Cristo e la prospettiva erano contornate da una mano vandalica con grossi contorni neri e diverse imbrattature di rosso da sembrare sangue, i quali in parte mi è riuscito levare ed inaltra di ricercare.

In quanto all’oro in mistura delle aureole che era molto danneggiato facci chiamare il Mro. Signor Coleiro per sentire il suo parere e combinarmi insieme a riunire il solo oro delle aureole - lasciando tutte le altre misture dei fondi e delle figure - come erano. E questo lo dico al pubblico per la pura verità.

All’Illmo. V. Bonello raccomando la pazienza di riconsiderare la descritta tavola o lavoro, tu che ha l’occhio vigile e penetrante, e correggere la parola rinnovata invece di restaurare, che è ceduta dalla sua incantevole pena nel suo pregattissimo articolo comparso nel Malta il 19 corrente: la quale semplice parola a mio sentire è ingiuriosa alla venerazione artistica di detta tavola ed a me di onesto restauratore.