THE ICONOGRAPHY OF
THE MALTESE GOOD FRIDAY
PROCESSIONAL STATUES:
THEIR DEVELOPMENT
BETWEEN 1960 AND 1984

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It is not my intention, in this short communication, to comment on the artistic merit — or otherwise — of the statues which will be reviewed. My aim is simply and solely to put on record the changes which have occurred in the iconography of Maltese and Gozitan Good Friday processional statues during the past quarter of a century. I would also like to emphasize that what I am writing about from 1960 to date is based on personal observation and my own personal notes. The point of departure is 1960. So we must first note the situation with regard to the statues’ iconography in that year.

The Situation in 1960

The Good Friday processions saw their beginning in the Maltese islands some time in the second half of the sixteenth century at Rabat in Malta and then spread to various other localities during the subsequent centuries, right up till the present time. The date of the first organisation of the more recent manifestations are known, with examples that spring to mind being Mosta in 1866 and that of the Gozo Cathedral in 1968. The dates of others are approximative: examples include the already-mentioned Rabat procession and Vittoriosa in circa 1700.10 We know when others were well-established such as the one at Qormi in 1764 though nothing is known of its origin.11 We know of the existence of statues, such as at Żejtun in 174212 and Luqa in 1795,13 but we don’t know whether processions were actually held in these dates as well.

In all, there are no less than fourteen such manifestations in Malta and five in Gozo. At Xewkija, there is also a set of statues but no procession takes place. All this makes up a grand total of no less than 179 statues in current use. But the changes in iconography refer to a total of fourteen localities. A large number of other parishes have statues of Our Lady of Sorrows and a few others, such as Ħamrun (St Cajetan) and Mellieha, have statues of Jesus Falling under the Cross. But these do not form part of our survey.

Very probably, most of the processions started with just one statue and the number was progressively increased during the subsequent years. The Rabat

GOOD FRIDAY STATUES

The procession still boasts of what is the oldest statue still carried processionally, the Scourging at the Pillar, probably imported from Sicily about four centuries ago. The earliest statues seem to have been of the type still found at Vittoriosa, that is, dressed-up figures. Vittoriosa is, in fact, perpetuating and continuing a centuries-old tradition of Maltese processional statues which extended also to titular statues such as the still-existent St Nicholas at Siggiewi. One may here point out that similarly-dressed statues have found favour in Gozo where there are no less than three similar sets of Good Friday statues, namely two at Victoria and another at Zejtun, which came into being in the nineteenth and the present centuries.

It is very probable that the transfer to papier-mâché (locally known as kartapesta) figures took place in the eighteenth century when we know that the first Maltese exponent of this art was Saverio Laferla who died in 1761 and who is credited with, among other statues, the well-known Our Lady of Sorrows venerated at the Ta' Giezu Church at Valletta.

The first development has been to emulate the Qormi procession which was the only one to possess a statue of Veronica, showing Christ’s face on her veil; the Crowning with Thorns with Christ sitting down or standing up; Jesus Falls under the Cross, locally known as the Redeemer; Our Lady of Sorrows shown with an angel or with St John; sometimes all three are present. In Gozo, this episode frequently shows a statue of the Madonna standing without any Cross as a background.

Up till 1960, no changes in this traditional set of eight are recorded except for three innovations which took place between 1878 and 1903.

5. G. Aquilina, op. cit., pp. 31–2, wherein the author gave documented information about the Valletta Good Friday processionals between 1673 and 1729. These statues were dressed-up figures.

The past quarter century, however, has more than made up for the relatively conservative trend of the previous 350 years. In 1976, Joseph Cassar Pullicino noted two types of development in Good Friday statues. Personally, I prefer to list the changes as being of three types, as shall presently be explained. One will note that certain parishes figure more prominently than others whilst the processions of Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea, Gharghur and Victoria’s parish of St George in Gozo, together with the Xewkija set, have not affected any changes in the iconography of their statues.

The first development has been to emulate the Qormi procession which was the only one to possess a statue of The Betrayal. Thus Zejtun imported a statue from Lecce, Italy – the work of Angelo Capoccia – in 1961 and paved the way for no less than another eight similar representations, all made locally with one exception as indicated below:

Mosta, in 1963, by Geraldo Dingli; Xaghra (Gozo), in 1964, by Salvatore Bruno of Italy, Bari; Paola, in 1971, by Antonio Farrugia; Cospicua, in 1972, by Louis Vassallo; Xewkija replaced the statue of St John, in 1970, by Antonio Farrugia; Cospicua, in 1972, by Louis Vassallo;

15. Xewkija replaced the statue of The Redeemer in 1985. The new statue, by Alfred Candoli, does not really depart from the traditional exposition except that Christ wears a white robe and a red cloak instead of the traditional red robe.
The third development has been the elaboration of certain episodes already represented in the procession, either before or after 1960. Qormi and Zejtun set the scene with three statues in 1962. Zejtun imported a group by Angelo Capocchia showing Pilate presenting Christ to the Jews (Ecce Homo) whilst Qormi imported two elaborations of The Scourging at the Pillar and Ecce Homo scenes, both by Salvatore Bruno, but which have subsequently been replaced by works made by Alfred Camilleri Cauchi in 1981 and 1982 respectively. These latter replacements also merit particular mention because of a certain amount of originality and a departure from accepted norms in that the Scourging scene actually shows Christ being unrolled from the pillar whilst the Ecce Homo stationary group includes also a pensive Caiaphas, a depiction not yet found in any other ‘Maltese’ group, whilst Pilate presents Christ to the Jewish mob.

Other additions have been made to The Betrayal groups of Mosta, Naxxar and Zejtun (Malta) in the sense that when they were originally manufactured in 1963, 1975 and 1978 respectively, they were depicted with three figures instead of the usual two. Thus the Mosta statue has a Jew holding aloft a torch, and the Naxxar and Zejtun (Malta) groups include the figure of St Peter.

In 1965, Qormi also imported, once more from Salvatore Bruno, a new Veronica group of three statues showing Veronica, Christ and a Jew. This group, an innovation still restricted to the Qormi procession, was replaced in 1981 with an original group, through the hand of Alfred Camilleri Cauchi, which not only includes Veronica and Christ but also Simon of Cyrene carrying the Cross together with a representation of the kind women of Jerusalem, also not found in other processions. In a way, the Qormi manifestation was enhanced by two new groups without actually increasing the number of stationary groups to be carried.

In 1968, a new procession — now with seven statues, the original eight less Veronica — started to be organised from the Gozo Cathedral which has its innovations as well. The Agony in the Garden statue was endowed with two angels (like those of Cospicua and Qormi) made by Agostino Camilleri — the figure of Christ is a very old statue by an unknown artist — whilst the Crucifixion scene includes also the figure of Longinus. However, a more striking innovation has been that the traditional statue of the so-called Monument — or Burial of Christ — with its rich canopy and (usually) angels was replaced by a stationary group showing the dead Christ in a winding-sheet being carried to His Burial by St John, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. This depiction, also by Agostino Camilleri, is certainly more true to life but it is a break with tradition.

16. J. Casar Pullicino, op. cit., p. 34, supplies the Luqa had a statue in 1963 “for the initiative of a Qormi man who had married and settled down in Luqa and wished to see the Judas episode represented with the other Passion statutes.” Unfortunately, this very reliable author, who is Malta’s leading folklorist, inexplicably seems to have been misinformed. I have checked and rechecked with reliable Luqa residents, including Messrs A. Micalef and A. Morada (two teachers) and the late Rev. G. Micalef (the rector and historian of Luqa itself), who confirmed that Luqa never had a Judas statue before 1973. Moreover, Mr Casar Pullicino omits mentioning the Judas statues of Paola, Cospicua and Naxxar and erroneously dates the Xaghra statue 1965 instead of 1964 (the statue actually arrived at Xaghra on 22.iii.1964 — personal written communication by C. Thuma on 23.v.1985). It is very probable that the information (acknowledged by Casar Pullicino) collected by and placed at the author’s disposal by Mr J. Bezrina was incomplete and perhaps misleading at times.


18. Ibid. This statue is also omitted.

19. The Crucifixion group, by Agostino Camilleri in 1968, was enlarged by the addition of the figure of Longinus, in 1989, by the same stationer.

20. The former stationary group of Our Lady of Sorrows, now no longer in use, included the figure of Mary Cleophas and was the work of Agostino Camilleri. Probably, the Deposition mentioned by J. Casar Pullicino, op. cit., p. 34, is this same statue.
Plate 11

(a) Razzia, Malta (1984): Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene (adult) by Arnold Camilleri (Catholic)

(b) Nezer (1979): The Resurrection by Agostino Catilleri

Plate 12

(a) Gozo Cathedral (1966): The Burial of Christ by Agostino Catilleri

(b) Qormi (1961): The Last Supper by Salvatore Bruno

Photographs by courtesy of Frendo Photographics, Qormi
Somewhat similarly, the Ghaxaq Crucifixion group includes a Roman soldier with a sponge on a stick—a 1977 addition by the Ghaxaq artisan Carmelo Agius—whilst the figure of Longinus is also found in the Crucifixion statue of Nadur, the latter being a 1976 work by Michael Camilleri Cauchi who has also produced two new statues, in 1981 and 1982, for Naxxar which are, in fact, elaborations of traditional themes: Ecce Homo and Jesus Falls under the Cross. The former is now made up of the two figures of Christ and Pilate whilst the latter includes a Roman soldier and is, in fact, the only Redeemer statue on the islands to do so.

One may conclude this chronicle by noting that four of the above-mentioned developments are also found in the Paola set of statues which, though devoid of any artistic merit whatsoever, include a flagging scene, an Ecce Homo scene with Christ and Pilate, Veronica flanked by an old woman and child, and a Monument scene of all traditional embellishments. The first three are early 1970's works by Antonio Farrugia whilst the Monument is actually a reconstruction of an old crucifix. The latest elaboration has been the Ecce Homo of Rabat, by Alfred Camilleri Cauchi in 1984, showing Christ in a sitting posture in front of the whipping-post.

This process of additions and elaborations to the Good Friday processions in the Maltese islands seems to be somewhat slowing down after the, so to say, hectic changes of the 1960's and 1970's. Very probably, no new additions will be allowed by the competent ecclesiastical authorities and changes will be channelled in the direction of replacements and elaborations, such as the projected elaboration envisaged for the Crowning with Thorns statues of Zejtun and Zebbug (Malta) in 1985. One also notes that the more recent elaborations and changes have more artistic merit than was the case up till about ten years ago, a commendable trend. It has to be pointed out, however, that there should not be changes just for change's sake and that artistically-valid statues should not be allowed to be replaced just to satisfy, as may be the case sometimes, parochial pique and personal whims.

22. J. Cassar Pullicino, op. cit., p. 34, also mentions a new statue of the Deposition for Naxxar in 1965. Actually, Naxxar has never had a statue of the Deposition but, in 1965, the statutory group of Our Lady of Sorrows was replaced by a new work by Giovanni Draghi (written personal communication by Rev. C. Catania, organizer of the Naxxar Good Friday procession, 18.iv.1985). Cassar Pullicino is probably referring to Draghi's statue which includes the figure of St. John.
23. The Zejtun statue has, in fact, been replaced by a 1985 three figure group, the work of Alfred Camilleri Cauchi. The Zebbug (Malta) Scourging and Ecce Homo have each had a soldier added, in 1985 and 1986 respectively, both being the work of Michael Camilleri Cauchi.