Roundel carvings seem to have been one of the very few decorative elements highlighting the austere facades of Maltese vernacular houses. They have enjoyed a long history and have been reported from different periods and civilizations, however, it seems that the Muslim world showed a predilection for them. Roundels have been especially popular in North Africa where they appear embellishing the doorway of the Great Mosque at Kairouan in Tunisia and can be found adorning common houses in the old Medina of Tripoli in Libya. They also appear in places which experienced a Muslim cultural impact such as Sicily and Spain. In Cefalù, Sicily, roundel carvings are carved in the lower parts of door jambs and, in San Pablo del Campo at Barcelona, Spain, they embellish a lintel with triple roll mouldings which recalls the fat mouldings found on Maltese buildings of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Catalan architecture boasts of interesting roundels decorating the bold Romanesque arcading of the entrance portal of the monastery of Sant Pere de Galligants, in Girona, which dates to the twelfth century. Other examples from the cloister of the monastery of Santa Maria de l'Estany in Pla de l'Estany, show the floral pattern which is also put to use in some Maltese examples. In the Maltese context, roundels have been observed in Punico-Hellenistic tombs and in several of the Late Roman and Byzantine catacombs, but they could have also become popular during the Muslim

3 M. Buhagiar, The Christianisation of Malta: Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530, Oxford 2007, 84.
occupation of Malta between 870 and 1091 A.D. On the other hand, the majority of the surviving examples found in vernacular houses seem to date to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.5

There are, however, earlier examples which seem to date to the early post-Muslim period and are found embellishing some of the tombstones discovered in the Saracenic Cemetery adjoining the Roman Domus in Rabat, Malta. Therefore, roundel carvings may have been introduced to the Maltese shores during the Muslim period, but they could have also been introduced at a later period 'through the Sicilian experience'.6 The re-Christianisation and Latinisation processes initiated by King Roger II in 1127 could have also led to the removal, and possibly even to the destruction, of many specimens. To avoid conversion to Christianity, the Muslims fled the Civitas and its suburb Rabat in search of shelter in the countryside,7 which situation could perhaps justify the rarity of roundels in Mdina and Rabat and the appearance of them in other districts. In fact, a nucleus of roundel carvings has been observed in the southern districts of Malta, especially in the Zurrieq, Qrendi and Siggiewi areas, where they seem to have been rather popular. Other specimens have been observed in Attard, Balzan, Naxxar and Tarxien to mention a few, whereas a small number of them are being prized in private collections around Malta. In contrast with Malta, only a handful of roundels have been found in Gozo, tending to suggest that in Gozo they are rare.

Roundel carvings contain an incised or carved motif enclosed in a circle which may be based on geometric designs, vegetal or floral motifs or an integration of other motifs such as dots. Oleg Grabar, an authority on Early Islamic Art, proposes three groups of motifs, namely, the vegetal or floral group, the geometrical, and the miscellaneous group which entails a number of various motifs such as pittings, which cannot be classified in either of the other two groups.8 Islamic Art prohibits the depiction of human beings and animals in religious contexts.9 Instead, abstract geometrical and floral designs intermingle in elegant compositions which embody perfection, linear growth and unity. This mode of mathematical ornamentation is given an existential meaning in Keith Critchlow's contributions on Islamic Art, where he argues that the Islamic artist bases his mathematical designs on the teachings of Islam only after manifesting himself in spiritual disciplines, the designs of which

7 Buhagiar 2005, 40.
8 For a complete list of roundel carvings in the Maltese Islands refer to R. Galea, A Descriptive Gazetteer of Muskatija-Windows and Roundel Carvings in the Maltese Islands; unpublished B.A. (Hons) dissertation presented in the Department of History of Art, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 2008.
The Maltese roundels show good craftsmanship (Fig. 3) Low relief carved, Bf on where as in the Islamic world they were chiselled out on various media including stone, stucco, wood, ivory, ceramics, mosaic, and occasionally bronze and transparent or glazed glass.

The carving technique used may be either of the following three methods or a combination of them. They may be delicately incised, carved in low relief or cut in intaglio. Incised roundels can be found in the entrance lobby of Palazzo Falson in Mdina and on the diaphragm arches which support the gabled roof of the Chapel of the Annunciation in Hal Millieri in Zurrieq. (Fig. 3) Low relief carved miniature roundels adorn the drip mould of the South doorway of the fifteenth century Church of Santa Maria ta’ Bir Miftuh in Gudja (Fig. 4) and intaglio carved roundels embellish the doorway of the Sptar il-Qadim in Mqabba. (Fig. 5) Other examples show various levels of relief or carry perforations. 'Hatching' can at times be applied onto the design of the roundel motif resulting in a play of light and shade and textural eminence as can be observed in one of the voussoirs of a building dated 1633 in Triq in-Nigret, Zurrieq (Fig. 6), whose roundels seem to have been integrated in an ad hoc manner. Maltese roundels show good craftsmanship and may also suggest that there might have been specialised workshops for the production of these decorative architectural elements, which features could possibly include decorations for one-light windows such as the Luqa and Zurrieq-Qrendi road documented examples.

In the Maltese islands, roundels can be found on the exterior wall facades and in internal courtyards of houses and occasionally on the facades of ecclesiastical buildings. They may be integrated along a series of loop holes or may be occupying a higher prominent place on a parapet-wall. Others embellish the blind masonry above the doorway on the first-floor, or else decorate the lintels of the ground floor doorway. Less frequently they appear on the keystone and the large voussoirs of an arched doorway or are cut into the corbels or front and side elevations of a first-floor open-stone balcony. Occasionally they also appear on maritime graffiti as in a particular example in the

---

15 Grabar, 182.

---

Fig. 5. These reutilised roundels adorn the entrance doorway of the Sptar il-Qadim in Mqabba.

Fig. 6. The 'hatching' employed on the upper part of a large voussoir of an arched doorway in Triq in-Nigret, Zurrieq.
Chapel of San Blas, Siggiewi. The appearance of roundels on both the obverse and reverse sides is very rare but an interesting example forms part of the collection of Palazzo Falson in Mdina. As already noted above, roundels bear geometrical and floral designs but they could also carry symbols such as the 8-pointed cross of the Order of St John, the fleur-de-lys motif, religious symbols such as Latin and Greek crosses as well as IHS monograms, at times being used profusely with geometrical or vegetal motifs.

As regards to the geometrical roundels documented in Malta, some boast of a certain sophistication. The destroyed roundels in Triq Sidtna ta’ l-Angli in Zebbug, Malta, (Fig. 7) are exceptional in both design and craftsmanship. Their composition is complex both of which carry a small central motif enclosed within an 8-pointed star with circles accentuating each of its arms. The 8-pointed star also appears in Moroccan and Spanish examples but it seems that in Malta it was rarely used. Another example where the star motif was employed is in Triq il-Kbira, Siggiewi, (Fig. 8) underneath an ornate balcony decorated with two roundels and a carved grill-like pattern underneath its corbels. It is composed out of a 12-pointed star which emits a dynamic and radiating design, enclosing a circular band with twelve circles. Other geometrical motifs which commonly appear are the swastika and the spiral volute. A 61-sided clockwise swastika incised within a circle highlights a first-floor window of a seventeenth-century building in Triq Santa Katerina, Żurrieq, whereas a spiral volute can be observed on a destroyed specimen documented in Luqa and in one of the ground-floor rooms of the Satar il-Qadim in Mqabba. (Fig. 9) The latter is particularly interesting because it carries a series of inverted isosceles triangles with hanging spherical lobes which bring to mind the serrated stringcourses of Palazzo Falson and Palazzo Santa Sophia, in Mdina as well as the hood mould of the chapel of Santa Maria ta’ Hal Xloq, in Siggiewi, all of which encompass Siculo-Norman idiosyncrasies. Other patterns contain abstract designs such as the roundel carving highlighting the mullioned window at the Magistral Palace in Fort St Angelo in Birgu. (Fig. 10) It is an important example of the Lo Steri type of window which can be found in Palermo and may have been an element of Chiaramonte aesthetic concern.

24 The roundel was donated to Palazzo Falson in April 2010. It was previously situated in a private collection. Buhagiar & Fiorini, 65.
25 The B-pointed star is designed out of an octagon. Designs based on this motif can be found employed on the ribbed cupola of the Minaret of Kutubiyya, in Marrakesh, Morocco and on the small observatory tower of the Paraiso de Alhambra, in Granada, Spain. See B.P. Maldonado, El Arte Hispano-Musulman en su Decoración Geométrica – Una Teoría para un Estilo, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, Madrid 1975, 148-9.
26 This destroyed fifteenth-century two-storey building with Siculo-Norman arches on the ground floor carries a roundel on one of its one-light windows. Photographic documentation exists in the Luqa file entitled ‘Two 15th c. Houses’, at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta.
27 Originally, the two-light window was the central feature of the front elevation of the medieval house. It was walled-up and concealed beneath a fine-grained cement rendering which was uncovered in 1932. See Buhagiar 2005, 119.
28 Other roundels decorating mullioned windows have been reported in Mdina such as the one is Sqaq Aragona but they boast of different stylistic concerns. Ibid., 121.
Fig. 12. This roundel in Triq it-Torri, in Qrendi, highlights the facade of a possible seventeenth century one-storey building which seems to have been integrated into a courtyard. The date 1605 is carved at the bottom.

Floral and vegetal motifs include the stylized 6-pointed motif which appears either singularly or integrated within a pattern based on the hexagonal repetitive unit which can prove to be visually harmonious as in a roundel in Triq Campis, in Żebbuġ, Malta, (Fig. 11) which echoes a similar example in Santa Cristina de Barriosuso, in Castille and León, Spain. This roundel is carved on a trapezoid-shaped ashlar which could have originally been a voussoir forming part of a series of roundels decorating an arched doorway. The design closely resembles the Flower of Life symbol. Whether the stone carver was conscious of its meaning is difficult to tell. Another floral motif is the rosette or round-petal floral motif which seems to have been rather popular in the early seventeenth century. It is employed on the portal of Chaieb El Ain mosque in Libya and can be observed on a number of local typologies either appearing on its own or fused with other motifs as in Triq it-Torri, in Qrendi. (Fig. 12)

In a particular example in Triq il-Karmnu, Żurrieq, (Fig. 13) the insignia of the Order of St John and the fleur-de-lys motifs are harmoniously integrated in a roundel built in the facade of a two-storey building dated 1674. The roundel is dated 1720 thus suggesting that the fleur-de-lys motif most probably dates to the early eighteenth century. The 8-pointed cross is, on the other hand, a symbol which post-dates 1530. Another roundel adorning the same facade boasts of an IHS monogram crowned by a Latin cross and a representation of a soul which are enclosed in a circular band of twenty-seven circles.

Another roundel carving bearing the IHS monogram is inserted into a possible nineteenth century building in Triq Vilhena, Żebbuġ, Malta. (Fig. 14) The roundel seems to have been reutilized. It bears two dates, one reads 1543 and the other 1840, the first of which probably refers to its date of execution. The 1840 date is incised in a rather different script and could possibly commemorate its date of insertion into the nineteenth century facade. What is particularly important is its fusion of Christian and Islamic motifs. The IHS monogram stands in the centre surmounted by various geometric bands of radiating circles and a palm wreath which encloses the whole design. The IHS monogram was popularized by the Jesuits and was used as their motto at times appearing along with the letters AMDG. This fusion of motifs testifies the level of importance of the Christian faith widely practiced by the Maltese under the rule of the Knights of Malta, and stresses Buhagiar’s statement that ‘Christianity was the newer element and [that] the Knights could discern the African Muslim substratum beneath the western European cultural veneers.’

The surviving roundels with sacred monograms tend to bear only Latin crosses, however, Greek crosses on roundels based on geometrical patterns still exist. Latin crosses may possibly suggest a post-1280 date when the Latin rite took the upper hand. A Naxxar roundel in Triq Santa Lucija (Fig. 15) documents in its iconographic content a Greek and Latin cross, which could perhaps be a reference to the two Christian religious rites of Late Medieval Malta. The Christian symbols could possibly indirectly recall the Latinisation and re-Christianisation campaign of the island succeeding the Muslim period and the process of Muslim converts to Christianity. Whether the stone carver was conscious of such a religious statement seems to be possible but highly improbable.
Fig. 13. This dated roundel in Trq il-Karmnu, in Żurrieq, fuses the insignia of the Order of St. John with the fleur-de-lys motif.

Fig. 14. The IHS monogram occupies the centre of the whole design on a large roundel in Triq Vilhena, Zebbug, Malta.

Fig. 15. The central 6-pointed floral motif is surrounded by floral designs, a Latin and Greek cross on a roundel in Triq St. Luċja, in Naxxar.

Fig. 16. This roundel in Triq Ta' Tavlin, in Żejtun, may well carry a religious connotation.

Fig. 17. One of the roundels in St. Agatha's Museum, in Rabat, Malta.

Buhagiar argues that in Sicily the Muslims 'showed a marked preference to the Greek rite. Greek Christianity and culture were an important political force throughout most of the Norman period and their influence remained an essential sociological aspect of Sicilian life for a very long time after that.'

The Maltese situation is still obscure but Malta could have closely followed the Sicilian pattern.

A religious connotation can be attributed to a roundel in Triq Ta' Tavlin in Żejtun (Fig. 16) bearing a wheel circumscribing a square grid pattern, probably a reference to St Catherine. Another carved stone displayed at St Agatha's Museum, Rabat, (Fig. 17) which also represents a wheel embellished with dots and a serrated pattern, could possibly be another reference to the saint.

The Museum hosts around ninety stone blocks and the abutting church facade is decorated with nineteen similar carvings which seem to date to the early sixteenth century or to various Late Medieval periods. Camilleri suggests that they are votive slabs but Buhagiar emphasises that they are carved stone blocks. Probably they formed part of an architectural frieze or friezes carrying various themes such as holy images, religious symbols, combat scenes, genre pieces of domestic and rural life, heraldic birds and animals, floral and foliated patterns and also geometric roundels. The roundels mainly carry rosettes, geometric motifs or even a star motif, at times surrounded by stylised palmettes or two flanking angels. They even show a marked preference for a centrally placed motif with various surrounds that stand independently of each other.

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 V. Camilleri, Ex Votos: A Complete Study of the Stone-Slabs Which are Found in the Church and at the Museum of St Agatha, Rabat, Malta, undated, 120.
41 Information obtained from a personal communication with Professor Mario Buhagiar.
Of particular interest and art historical relevance are the roundels embellishing the serrated string courses of buildings. Serrated stringcourses are utilized on Palazzo Santa Sophia and Palazzo Falson in Mdina which principally date to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, however, it seems that the serrated stringcourse could have also been utilized on late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries as appears to have been the case of two examples from Mqabba (Fig. 18) and Żurrieq, the former of which is the most remarkable. It bears vegetal motifs such as stylised Corinthian or acanthus and cypress leaves, and geometrical motifs such as spiral volutes and triangles which at times form abstract designs. Unfortunately, both friezes were subjected to a disastrous restoration and therefore have to be studied with great reserve. None of the surviving serrated friezes of Mdina have roundel carvings but the Gatto Murina Palace (Fig. 19) possibly dating to the early fifteenth century shows a stringcourse marking the division between the two storeys on its original facade. The miniature blind arcading recalls a parallel stringcourse in Palazzo Policarini in Enna, Sicily. However, the former boasts greater elegance and its consoles are decorated with low relief carved motifs such as floral and foliated patterns, circumscribed Stars of David, and armorial shields of the Gatto and Murina families, with bezants and lampreys.

A 1398 limestone plaque forming part of the collection at Museo Pepoli at Trapani, Sicily, shows more explicitly a close relationship between roundel carvings and heraldic devices. An armorial shield is held by two heraldic animals on the lower register and is flanked in the upper register by two roundels. Such a typology seems to have been common and similar types can be observed in Late Medieval buildings in Sicily. A comparable example in Triq il-Knisja, Attard, Malta, presents a roundel carving (Fig. 20) and a plaque (Fig. 21) which possibly represents the Imperial Eagle and it is probably an armorial shield associated with either the confederation of the Aragonese Crown which would date it to a pre-1530 period, or more likely to the Kingdom of Sicily and Naples which would suggest a sixteenth or early seventeenth century date. The eagle features on armorial shields of the Sicilian Aragonese

---

43 Buhagiar 1984, 17, 18; H. Braun, Works of Art in Malta - Losses and Survivals In the War, London 1946, 18.
45 Buhagiar & Fiorini, 61.
46 Ibid.
nobility for example in the Alagona family shield at the Dominicans at Rabat, Malta, at the Abbatija tad-Dejr and at the stone blocks at St Agatha Museum, also at Rabat, Malta.⁴⁷

The occurrence of the roundel carving in Maltese vernacular architecture may well be the result of a common Mediterranean climate and ecological environment, or else, a direct legacy from the Muslim past. Other features of Maltese vernacular architecture such as the *muxrabija*-window, the *dukkien*, the *siqifah*, and the *miglis*, all seem to point towards a Muslim inheritance. The *siqifah*, the *muxrabija* and the roundel carving are, in fact, common features in the Muslim world.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, roundel carvings are disappearing from the Maltese architectural landscape, mostly in the name of 'progress', but their appearance on both domestic and ecclesiastical buildings testifies their impact on the Maltese architectural language.

---

⁴⁷ Information obtained from a personal communication with Professor Mario Buhagiar.