



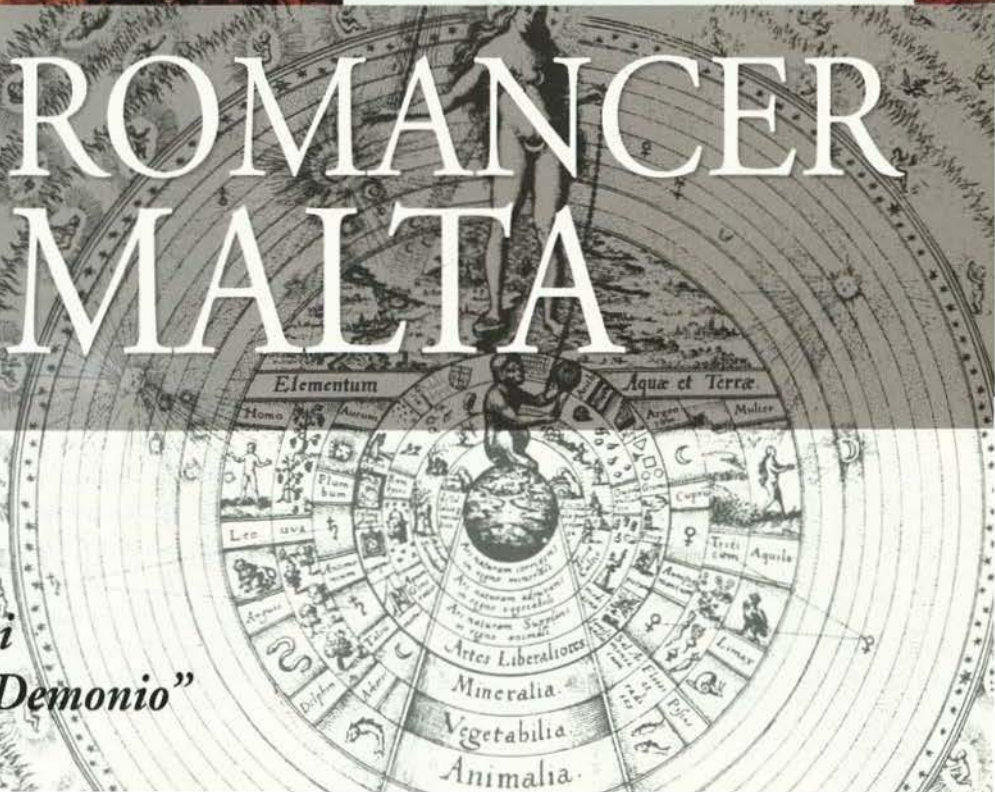
CARMEL CASSAR

Professor Carmel Cassar is a cultural historian who has published mainly on Maltese and Mediterranean Culture and History of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At present Prof Cassar lectures in the Department of Tourism Studies at the University of Malta. His books include; Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta; A Concise History of Malta; Daughters of Eve: Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta; Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition; Fenkata: An Emblem of Maltese Peasant Resistance.

THE

NECROMANCER *of* MALTA

*Vittorio Cassar:
"Ha Tanti Liberi
e sa Quanto un Demonio"*



While Maltese researchers have managed to throw light on the Maltese military engineer and architect Gerolamo Cassar, we still have learnt very little about his elder son, Vittorio, mainly due to the relative rarity of surviving evidence. Of particular interest are a series of 29 documents dating between 1586 and 1606, extracted from several archives, where Vittorio Cassar is portrayed as a worthy son of his gifted father.

Of particular interest are a series of documents relating to the character of Vittorio Cassar, that appear to justify the opinion of E. Schermerhorn that 'Fra Vittorio was of a difficult temperament, ever to the alert of the affronts and provocations' that often led to the embittered quarrels and criminal offences. We thus learn that the engineer was imprisoned twice by two months *ad carcerem turris* for wounding his maternal uncle Brandano Cassia. On 5 December 1594 he was again imprisoned for six months at Fort St Angelo, 'for having used stones to hammer upon the bedroom windows of Fra Emmanuele de Carnero's residence and beaten his domestic servant.'

The documents also reveal another interesting aspect of Vittorio Cassar's character: On at least two occasions, one in 1602, which refers back to the 1590s, the other in 1606, he was accused at the Court of the Inquisition of having been

involved in fortune telling. On both occasions...he was sought after for his reputed powers of relieving people of their state of anxiety, of reassuring them and of reading their future.

Further in-depth analyses of the Inquisition archives has revealed more valuable information on Vittorio Cassar's qualities, not just as the principal architect and engineer living in Malta after his father's demise, but also as a necromancer, diviner, healer and exorcist.

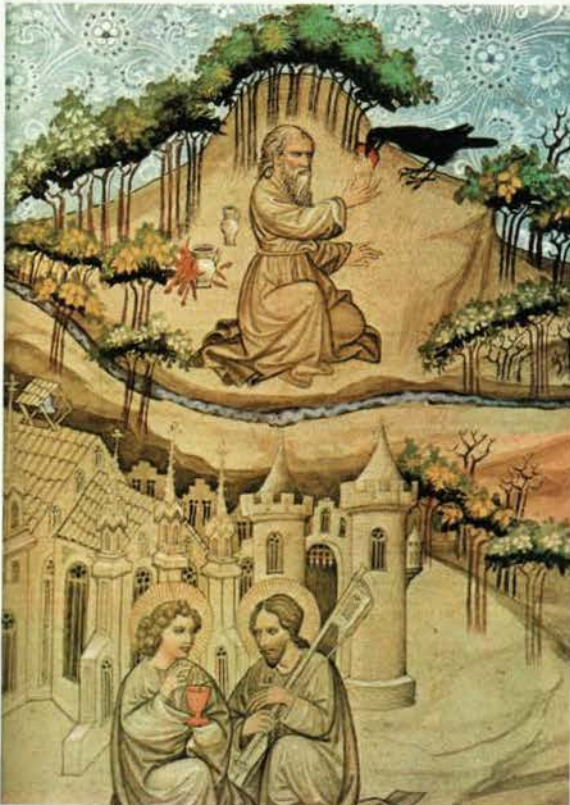
A Necromancer and a Man of Learning

Fra Vittorio seems to have been influenced by Francesco Giorgi's work *De Harmonia Mundi* first published in 1525. Giorgi, as a Christian cabalist, believed that the *Cabala* could prove the truth of Christianity. The connection would be better understood if one keeps in mind the Neoplatonist theories of the time in which the Vitruvian architecture figured prominently. For Giorgi it had a religious significance connected with the Temple of Solomon.

In 1601 Vittorio Cassar admitted to the Inquisition that he kept and perused several prohibited books which he said were received from a friend of his in Messina called Mastro Gioanne Mancuso – a brass-worker. Three of the books, namely, *La Cavicola de Solomone*, *De Mansionibus Lune* by Pietro Baiolardi and another book by Pietro Debanò (presumably D'Abano) were in manuscript form. According to Cassar, Mancuso was looking for someone who could make use of the experiments they contained. Vittorio said that, at the time, he had been sent to Gozo 'per far fare la fortezza' and since Don Antonio Attardo would not absolve him during confession, he handed the books to the Inquisition for burning.

In a spontaneous comparison before the Inquisition Tribunal on 5 June 1605, Fra Vittorio explained among other things that when his father, Gerolamo, was still alive, he had made use of a recipe found in one of his father's books that could be applied on women in difficult labour. The remedy consisted in giving a crust of bread to the sick woman on which the words: + Jesus + Natus + were written accompanied by the recitation of three *Ave Marias* and three *Pater Nosters*. Fra Vittorio admitted to have adoperated the remedy twice. Once to the daughter of Fra Simon Provost, the Master of Mint, and on another occasion to one of his neighbours in Valletta.

Apparently Cassar remained obsessed with books on necromancy and other related subjects till his death. On 24 April 1609, Pietro De Armenia of Valletta referred to a discussion he had had with a prostitute named Gioanna



- ◀ A prophet was the human spokesman of a god and this special relationship to the divine led to the association of miracles and supernatural abilities with prophecy, including the ability to see into the future. This illustration from a 15th Century manuscript shows Elijah being miraculously fed by ravens.

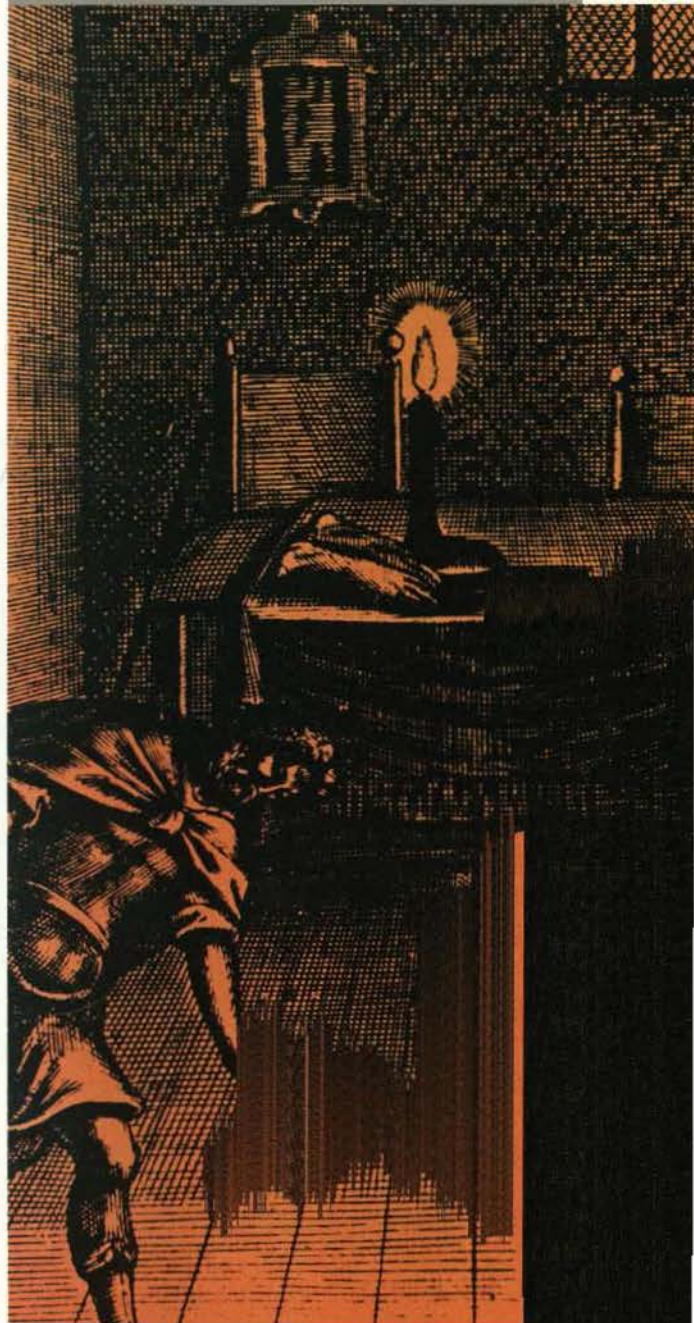
La Siracusana, who claimed to be the carnal friend of Fra Vittorio Cassar. Gioanna declared that the year before, she had intentionally absented herself from Malta, out of fear of the Inquisition, since she learned that Fra Vittorio had a collection of writings and books on magic. But although she did declare that he kept such books and writings at home, she could not say what they contained. Evidently Cassar's girlfriend was illiterate.

As has already been stated, the possession of, and trade in such books were prohibited by the Church. Yet there seems to have been a relatively substantial demand for occult titles. The popularity of *La Clavicola di Solomone* has already been pointed out. We also learn that Tiberio Camarda had at some point attempted to steal *La Clavicola di Solomone* from Cassar, '*perche haverebba cavato gran frutto di quella.*' However, it is interesting to note that Cassar was aware of the work by the medieval magician Pietro d'Abano 'whose operations were directed to the angels or spirits of planets, with the purpose of compelling them to do something extraordinary'. At the same time, Pietro Baiolardo was considered to be a magician of such great powers that in nineteenth-century Sicily, the eminent ethnographer G. Pitre', could still recall the phrase: '*cumannari li Diavuli comu Pietru Baiurdu*' (Commanding the Devils like Pietro Baiolardo). In other words, the three texts must have had a great impact on Cassar's activities as a magician. No wonder Cassar was often accused of practising necromancy.

There are indications that Vittorio Cassar was considered to be a gentleman of great learning. In January 1597 Vincentio Xerri recalled a discussion he had with Bernardo La Vecchia and the deceased Augustino Cassar on board the Capitana galley while on anchorage in Messina. One of his mates declared '*che fare Vittorio Cassar figlio del quondam Geronimo lo Ingegneri sapeva fare delle magarie.*' Augustino had asserted that on consulting Fr Vittorio for love magic, Fra Vittorio gave him a bone which he had to burn in front of his lady love. Augustino even stated that Fra Vittorio had a box which was full of '*imbarazzi di magarie*' (things related to magic), adding that Fra Vittorio had the habit of cutting pieces of flesh from the corpses of those who had been hanged, drawn and quartered. The following year the Catalan knight Fra Bartolomeo Brul confirmed that Fra Vittorio had in time become a popular topic of gossip. In a conversation that Fra Brul had had with several Castilian knights, it was rumored that Fra Vittorio had attempted an experiment which would liberate him and the other inmates from imprisonment at St Elmo.

According to the famous story of Saul and the 'witch' of Endor, the king failed to obtain an omen of the future from God by dreams or by lots or by prophets, and consulted a medium who summoned up for him the shade of the prophet Samuel. The ghost appeared as an old man dressed in a robe, and foretold Saul's imminent death and the defeat of Israel (1 Samuel, Chapter 28)

*Fra Vittorio even keeps
a demon in a jug which
he has locked in his room*





Rumours about Fra Vittorio's abilities spread far and wide in Malta. Salvo Camilleri recommended that Martina Burlò of Vittoriosa resort to Fra Vittorio for love magic because 'Fra Vittorio Cassar knows very well what remedies should be given to similar persons'. Besides 'Fra Vittorio even keeps a demon in a jug which he has locked in his room'.

His repute as necromancer was so great, that once a school-boy found it convenient to attribute an experiment he had invented to Fra Vittorio. In July 1606, Francesco de Gaeta – a sixteen year old boy who was then attending the school of Giacomo Xerri in the vicinity of the Jesuit Church in Valletta – declared that one of his school mates, Gio. Luigi Metaxi, had practiced divination by designing the shape of the earth. Metaxi drew several geometrical lines writing down the names of several planets to figure out when de Gaeta would leave Malta. Metaxi declared to his friend that he had learned the experiment from Fra Vittorio. When summoned in front of the Inquisitor, Metaxi asserted that since he heard that Fra Vittorio makes divination, he had told de Gaeta *'gli dissi anco che ditto secreto m'havevo imparato il ditto Fra Vittorio Cassar si bene non e vero nemmeno il dette secreto, ma lo fu inventione mai per burlarli.'*

In reality, Cassar had an inquisitive mind and he did not miss an opportunity to discuss and learn new concepts in science, engineering or otherwise. Such an impression is best gained from



European interest in Astrology is reflected in this 17th century French engraving showing an allegorical figure, combining the signs of the zodiac with the works of such astronomers as Tycho Brahe and Copernicus

a case dated December 1604 when Cassar, accompanied by his brother Fra Gabriele, was reported to have visited the Orders' ovens in Valletta with the intentions of examining the newly installed mill. At the oven, the two Cassar brothers seem to have had a stimulating discussion with Cosimo Lo Furno, the Sicilian gentleman, inventor of the new machine. Cosimo told Fra Vittorio that he knew a lot of secrets and prided himself on being well-informed about what was going on in Rome, adding that he even knew a secret about how to repel an invasion. When called upon to give witness before the Holy Office, Fra Vittorio admitted that Cosimo and himself had discussed *'artificii di foco'* (firing equipment) and other machines and architecture. It thus transpires that Fra Vittorio considered himself to be, above all else, a man of science, of which magic then formed an integral part.

Vittorio Cassar and Islam

But Cassar's formation as necromancer is unique, since it was not only based on the learned magic of the Renaissance, but managed to combine Christian beliefs with the beliefs and practices of the Muslim world. Cassar obviously had access to

this culture due to the presence of a multitude of Muslim slaves who were annually captured in the crusading activities of the Order of St John. By 1590 slaves (in Malta) numbered around 3,000.

Thanks to the presence of the Muslim slaves, it was possible for Vittorio Cassar to learn Arabic and he was often called upon and requested by the Inquisition to describe the contents of Arabic books that were confiscated and perused on the island. In a case against the 'Moor' called Hambar, slave of the Bailiff Fra Federico Cozza, Cassar admits:

Per la pratticha che io ho della lingua (araba), et anco simil sorte de fatture che sogliono fare i mori per essermene passate molte alter (scritte) per le mani si come vostra Signoria che mi ha fatto chiamare alter volte per il dette effetto.

Cassar seems to have been considered as the Arabic language 'expert' of the Tribunal. In a letter from Gozo dated 22 July 1601, he asserts that he was unable to leave the sister island in order to examine some Arabic texts, since the Council of the Order instructed him to return to Gozo without

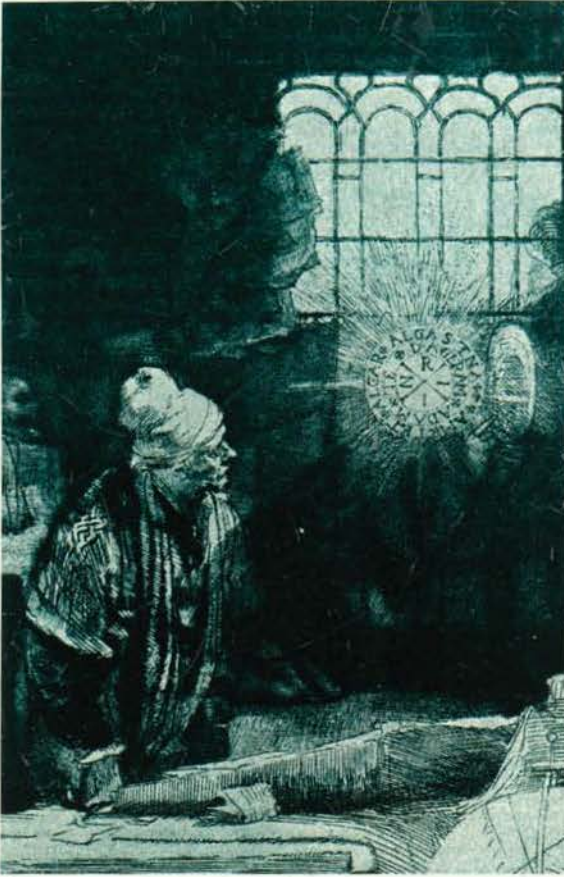
delay. At the time he seems to have spent most of his time in Gozo, at least the middle months of the year 1600. In Gozo, Cassar appears to have participated fully in the activities that took place there.

Cassar admitted to have learned how to read and write Arabic from a Moor by the name of Sellem, a slave of the Order of St John, who walked with the aid of crutches due to a fall in which he broke both his legs. Sellem had been teaching Cassar for several years and had even offered to teach him divination by invoking the stars in order to learn the future. Cassar admitted to have tried experiments on divination and even presented a copy book which was used for studying the lessons. He added that he considered divination as useless, even though he had practised it several times. But that was before he learned that such practices were prohibited by the Church. Finally Cassar stated that Sellem had tried to teach him necromancy, which was called *reuchamia* in Arabic, but he did not want to know anything about it since he knew that it was prohibited. Obviously Cassar must have relied on the general belief '*che detti more facessero detti remedii operare per via di magarie, per vertu' del demonio...Io intendo dire pubblicamente in piazza che question moro xich Selem sia publico magaro et*

Cassar had an inquisitive mind and he did not miss an opportunity to discuss and learn new concepts in science, engineering or otherwise

According to the New Testament the end of the present world would be heralded by a multitude of signs such as wars, earthquakes and famines. One of the central symbols in the elaborate imagery of the Book of Revelation is a scroll sealed with seven seals, the opening of which lets fearful terrors loose upon the world: Death, the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, is given power over a quarter of the world when the fourth seal is opened. Detail from *The Triumph of Death*, a series of frescoes by Francesco Traini





▲ An imaginative depiction of Dr. Faust, described by contemporaries as a charlatan. Later legends told how he performed feats of magic and made a pact with the devil. *Dr. Faustus or The Astrologer* by Rembrandt.

maleficio...' as was earlier related by Mastro Dionisio Cardona.

On his part, Sellem ben Mansur – an Egyptian from Cairo who at the time of his disposition declared himself to be about forty years of age – admitted that he knew how to read and write in Arabic and that he practiced astrology which he refers to as *chot ir-ramel*. He asserted that he came from a family of astrologers and that he had learned the 'profession' from his father. He added that Fra Vittorio Cassar had visited him thirty or forty days before, and asked Sellem to teach him astrology. Sellem obliged and gave Cassar several lessons, but was not sure whether Cassar had understood what he tried to teach him.

The Obsessive Search for Hidden Treasure

The search for hidden treasure may be considered as a major obsession of the sixteenth century elite. It whetted the appetite of lawyers, notaries, priests and friars who practised demonic magic. Local fables frequently indicated

ruined houses, or chapels as sites of buried treasure. Actual licences for the search of treasure trove were issued by several sixteenth-century Grand Masters. In 1530 one such licence was issued to Luca de Armenia and Antonio Callus to search for gold and silver hoards; in 1537 a similar license was issued to the medical doctor Giuseppe Callus; in 1536 (?) permission was given to Petro Calava; and finally Fra Simon Provost, Master of the Mint, was given permission to look for hidden treasure together with Gaspare Mombron, Antonuccio Bonelle and others, on condition that one-third of their finds had already been discovered before the advent of the Hospitaller Order in 1530. G. Wettinger points out that in 1525 a trove consisting of about thirteen pounds weight of Byzantine gold coins was discovered.

The Franciscan Friar Minor, Fra Pietro di Malta, was obsessed with the idea of buried treasures. He was made to believe, by two of his friends, that in the chapel of St Paul the Hermit (sites at Wied il-Ghasel, Mosta) there was a hidden treasure. Such beliefs were not unfounded since excess cash was often deposited underground for safekeeping and such hoards occasionally turned up accidentally.

There was not necessarily anything magical about the search for hidden treasure, but the assistance of a conjuror – often a Muslim slave who practised divination – was frequently invoked. The combination of gullibility and greed sometimes led people to foolish lengths, and people from all quarters of society used magical techniques to separate people from their money. The Canon of the Mdina Cathedral, Don Ambrosio Pace, had heard several rumours from '*parecchi vecchi e homini*

The combination of gullibility and greed sometimes led people to foolish lengths, and people from all quarters of society used magical techniques to separate people from their money

atiani' (several old men) that his house had originally belonged to Jews and that it should therefore contain a buried treasure since in the past several Jews had lived in Mdina. One day while at home he started to search for the treasure by digging in a corner of a room in the basement without any success. Sometime later, a Cypriot Greek suggested to Don Ambrosio that he should consult with a Muslim galley-slave who was an expert in such matters. The slave was brought over and he began to pace all over the basement while reading from a book. Owning and perusing the right book, however, was only the beginning of the search. The magician had then to locate the potential site of the treasure. He therefore asked Don Ambrosio to prove him with a plate in which he deposited a piece of gold and one of silver given to him by the owner of that house and insisted that the treasure was hidden in the area where Don Ambrosio had dug. For this service, the galley-slave obtained a gold ring and added that he needed the help of another slave. When the slave-magician returned accompanied by his friend, he asked for a black hen – which had to be killed in the trench – and another ring, both of which were provided by Don Ambrosio. At this point however, the Canon realized he was being fooled and turned them out of his house. Gaspare Bonnichì from Vittoriosa had similarly been fooled by a galley-slave who used the same kind of divination.

Yet people did not always resort to Muslim slaves to look for hidden treasure. In 1596 the painter Mattheo Stagno of Valletta confessed that he had been invited by the French knight Fra Aboglion to help Fra Vittorio Cassar search for the treasure in a plot of land which Cassar owned in Birkirkara. He stated that those present included Jacobo Caminici from Vittoriosa and Jachi Francese (cook of the Prior of Naples). On their arrival on the site, Fra Vittorio placed four swords in the form of a cross and, kneeling down, started reading slowly from a book. His companions put blessed palm branches on the cross.

A few days later, the French knight Fra Gabriel Lepetit asserted that from the moment that he had obtained permission from the Grand Master to seek buried treasure, many Maltese revealed to him that in an area of Birkirkara, there was a treasure buried and that Cassar was the first to approach him. On his part, Fra Vittorio Cassar recalled how his father Gerolamo knew about the existence of this treasure



Goddess of Fortune: The common man, unconcerned with lofty concepts of fate and free will, felt himself to be at the mercy of capricious gods who had to be placated if the worst decrees of destiny were to be avoided: Medieval representation of the goddess of fortune with six hands, symbols of providence and protection



Early seventeenth century portrait of a Hospitaller (dated 1633). the painting includes the coat-of-arms of the Cassar family (top-left corner). The two Cassar brothers, Vittorio and Gabriele, were in fact members of the Order. Could it be that this portrait represent the younger brother, Gabriele? He was surely middle-aged by 1633

and had once told him that in the Church of Santa Sophia in Constantinople they keep a record of all treasure and for that reason he had bought that particular area of land. In order to identify the spot, Gerolamo put four large stones, but since his death, during the reign of Grand Master Verdalle (1582 – 1595), Fra Vittorio had not bothered to look for treasure. Not long afterwards Fra Lepetit, accompanied by Cassar, spent many a night looking for treasure in that area. The French knight admitted that this went on for three continuous months and that the area had originally belonged to the 'governor of the Jews'. In the course of the search, both Fra Vittorio and himself had heard a lot of noise and had seen a black man and a horse in that place. But although they had dug up parts of the area, they had failed to find any hidden treasure.

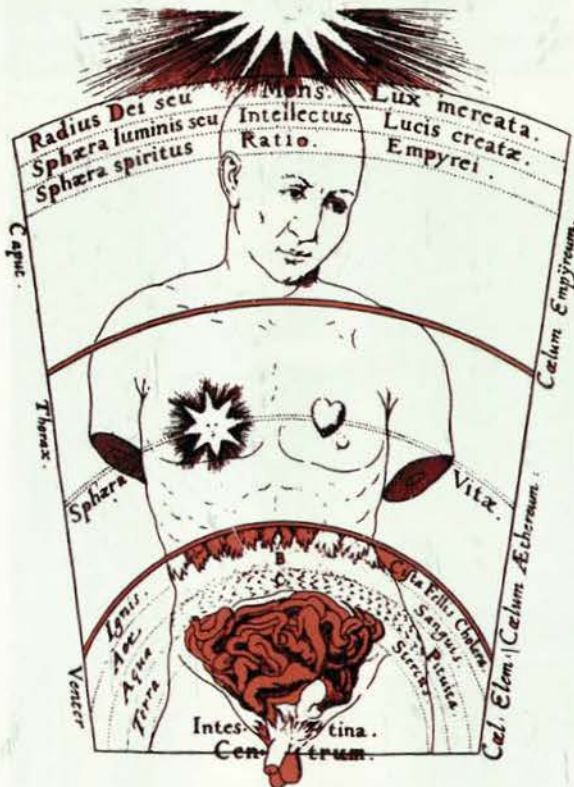
Sorcerer, Healer and Diviner

On 19 October 1595, Mario Xuereb reported a discussion, for which he was present, between Tiberio Camarda and his friend Julio Cassia. The three of them were imprisoned in the same cell at the Grand Master's prisons, where Camarda admitted that he had learned a great deal on necromancy from Fra Vittorio. Amongst other details, he had learned how to

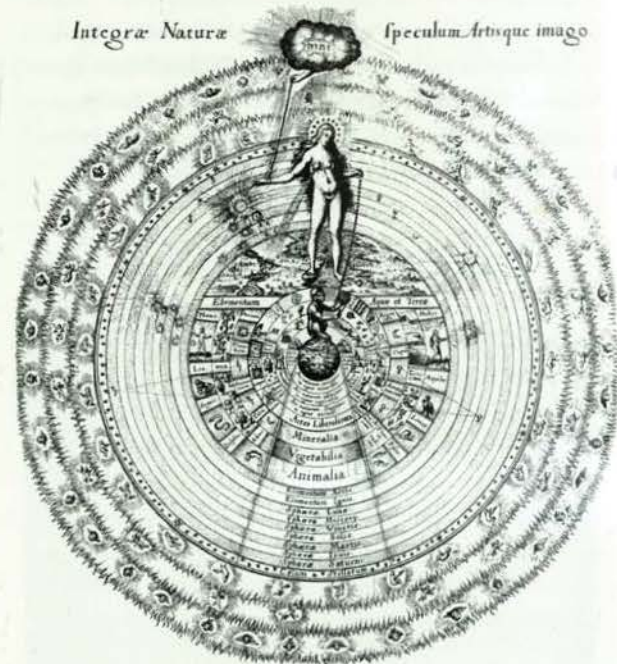
'accommodate' a bone taken from the body of a hanged man on which he wrote an invocation starting with the words *scongiuro vos*. Cassar was reputed to have taught Camarda how to invoke the spirits in order to search for buried treasure and how to employ ink on the finger nails of a pregnant woman or a virgin which had to be accompanied by prayers (including three *Pater Nosters* and *Ave Marias*) and then invoke an evil spirit from whom he could learn anything he wanted to know, to alleviate his miseries, to attract women and even to endure torture. Tiberio even kept on his own person a paper in an unknown script which would help him overcome his rival in a duel.

Cassar's reputation as sorcerer seems to have remained strong in later years among those who had to endure torture. In March 1607, a young Maltese man named Alessandro alias *Elefante* – imprisoned at the Grand Master's prisons and awaiting to be tortured by means of the *corda* – asked Vittorio Cassar to prepare a potion that could make him bear the pains of torture so that he would not be forced to confess.

It appears that Fra Vittorio took pride in his role as necromancer. Mariano Deadriano, a Sicilian from Castrogiovanni (modern Enna) who served as clerk in the



▲ Robert Fludd's key to the universe: the physical and spiritual attributes of archetypal man, the microcosm, are shown to have their exact counterparts, on a larger scale, in the universe, the macrocosm



▲ The Cabala's central doctrine deals with the unfolding of the hidden and unknowable God into the 'fullness' of the manifest God, known by his works. A diagram of the universe by the 17th century author Robert Fludd, with the links between the hidden God and the world

building of the Gozo fort (Forte Garzes at Mgarr harbour [Gozo]), considered himself a good friend and close associate of Fra Vittorio, the architect of that project. Fra Vittorio often had long discussions with the Sicilian clerk and confided many secrets to him. Amongst other things, Fra Vittorio admitted that he knew enough secrets on necromancy and magic to permit him to get in touch with the devils and spirits whenever he wished. He added that he had a good number of books on necromancy and magic which he hid in order not to be confiscated by the Inquisition. Cassar even agreed to teach necromancy to two of his friends from Messina and who had spent some time with him in Gozo. Deadriano further added that Vittorio Cassar was *gran magaro* (a great wizard). Mariano also stated that Vittorio could communicate with the spirits by putting some ink on the palm of the hand of a virgin boy, and by proffering several words, he could command the spirits to comply with his wishes and to make him win in games.

The evidence given by Deadriano seems to contain a strong element of truth. A couple of years earlier, the French knight Fra Antonio Ghijon declared that '*per le tante preghiere*' (due to the many pleadings), Fra Vittorio agreed to adoperate divination in order to win in the game of dice. Fra Ghijon added that he had resorted to divination techniques because he had lost a sum of nine hundred scudi to another French knight Fra Musu La Lea. Fra Ghijon further believed that '*ditto cavaliere guadagnava al gioco con qualche artificio e virtute diabolica per il che io mi pigliai gran dolore*'. Thus a few days later, in the vicinity of the Carmelite Church in Valletta, he met Cassar in the house of a Greek woman called Lucretia. On this occasion Fra Vittorio adoperated palmistry on a nine year old girl by writing with ink on her hand and after having smeared her thumbs with oil, he interrogated her on the fact that Fra Ghijon had lost such a hefty sum of money in dice games. The girl declared that she could see:

Un personaggio ben vestito con una corona al capo, e molte altre persona che lo seguivano...ma noi non potevamo vedere cosa alcuna e ditto Fra Vittorio disse che le cause era perche io e lui non eramo vergini, ma la figliola le vedeva perche era vergine...e la figliola disse che quelli spiriti gli respondeano e in particolare quello della corona gli diceva, che ditto cavaliere mi havea guadagnato detti danari al gioco con arte diabolica stante che teneva un spirito astretto in un anello che portava al doto iccolo della man destra...

The belief in spirits, present in daily life, formed the basis on which both popular and learned magic could develop, for it was possible to use their supernatural powers to protect



The Hanged Man, a card from the Tarot pack, still used in fortune telling

oneself from aggression, predict the future or acquire wealth or love. Obviously, the Church considered consultation with the spirits as the type of divination technique that was potentially the most dangerous. Fortune-telling was particularly sinister, since it was often connected with sorcery and the casting of spells. Witch beliefs were particularly widespread, since medical knowledge then proved inadequate, while magic could always be put forward as an explanation. In such circumstances, Cassar seems to have adoperated a basic stereotyped method both for divination and healing purposes.



- ◀ *Astrology with the three Fates of Greek Mythology, Clotho, the spinner of destiny, Lachesis, weaver of chance, and Atropos, who cuts the thread of life: from a French cabalistic manuscript*

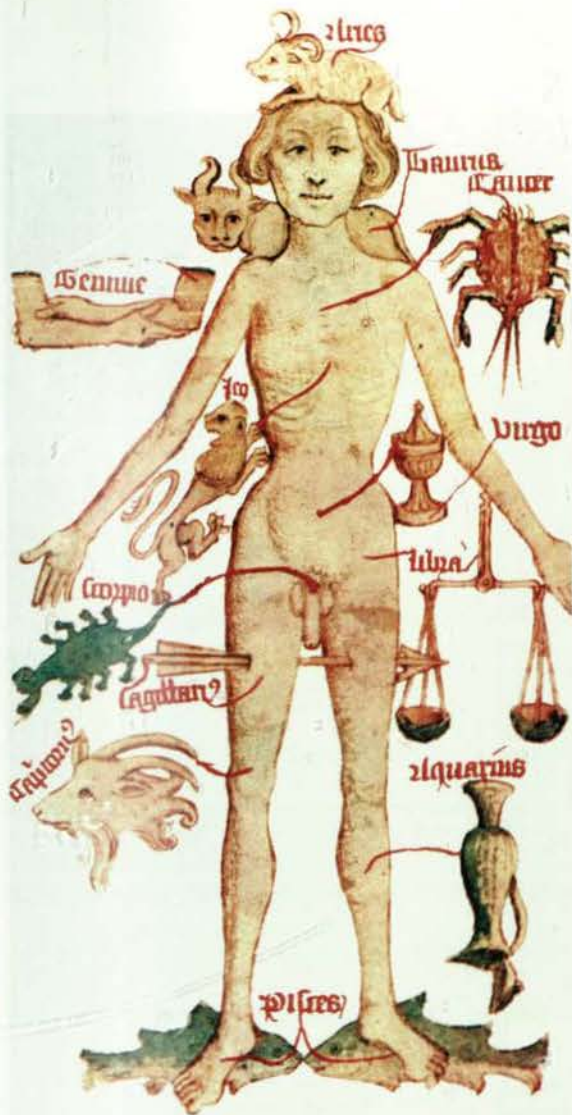
Probably Cassar's medical knowledge must have been influenced by readings from the Greek writer Galen, who, following Aristotle, believed that man derives life from the vital spirits which travel from the left ventricle of the heart to all parts of the body, including the brain. One must keep in mind that the Church strongly prohibited the dissection of human bodies by doctors. Since healing methods at the time were mostly based on suppositions, it was normal for most healers to believe that they could attain supernatural powers which involved mystery. Thus Henciona, wife of Vittorio Cassar's cousin Leonardo Gadineo, resorted to the expert necromancer to heal her fifteen-month-old daughter, after she had consulted several physicians without effect and had also requested to various priests and friars for exorcism, but no one could cure her daughter. Having visited the girl, Cassar asked his cousin-in-law to procure him a virgin girl, upon which Henciona admits:

Io desiderosa della sanita di mia figlia, chiamai li in casa un figliola de Mastro Francesco Doneo chiamata Caterina d'anni otto mia vicina e detto Fra Vittorio gli prese il detto pollice della mano e gli raschio un poco l'ungio di quello, e con un poco d'olio comune che mi dimando gli l'onse, et interrogo' detta figliola si vedeva qualche cose nel ungio, e lei respose che vedeva una faccia allora detto Fra ttorio gli disse e dimando in questa maniera che infirmitta tiene questa figliola intendendo per la mia Caterina gli respondeva di no, allora dimando sara questa infirmitta causata dalla parte di dietro o' davanti, del capo, e respose la figliola che l'infirmita veniva dalla parte de inant del cerbro...

According to the Provençal member of the Order, Fra Giovanni Forneri, Fra Vittorio applied palmistry even for love magic. Elaborating, Forneri said that Cassar called a young six-year-old boy who was passing by. He made him open the palm of his hand and started scribbling in ink and proferring several words from a book. But the experiment was not completed as they boy took fright and ran away. But Cassar adopted the same type of divination techniques against the baneful influences of the evil eyes which threatened the relationship



- ◀ *Symbols of the golden sun and the horned moon, in astrology the principal arbiters of a man's fate*



▲ Astrological diagram showing the parts of the body which each zodiac sign is supposed to affect

between two married partners. Margarita Liftech, who lived at the *castello del Gozzo* (Gozo Citadel), wanted to check whether her son-in-law, Bricio Cilia, had been induced to turn his attention to the love of a courtesan because he was *maleficiato*. On this occasion, Fra Vittorio made use of the services of a twelve-year-old girl who, on having her nail thumbs smeared with oil asserted that she could see the shadows of two negro slaves. Such activity suggest that the insecurity of married life was particularly felt by the wife who often remained at home under the tutelage of her mother, while the husband plied his trade away from the home.

A good example of this is provided by the mother and sister of Fra Vittorio himself. On 23 September 1596 Mathia, widow of *Mastro Gerolamo l'Ingegneri* and mother of Fra Vittorio, admitted to have adoperated a magical formula in

aid of her sixteen year old daughter Marietta. Both women admitted that the previous year Marietta had been mistreated by her husband Natale Rizza, who wanted to establish himself in Sicily. For this reason, the two women asked the help of a Moorish slave who prescribed the mixing of a consecrated host with her husband's wine.

Vittorio Cassar and Popular Magic

Vittorio Cassar certainly looked down on popular magic. On 17 August 1596, he accused a Greek middle-aged woman named Calli of having practised magic by thrusting a black-handled knife in an onion while proferring some secret. Cassar explained that Calli's intention was to hinder the galleys of the Order from departing from Malta since her carnal friend was sailing on one of them. He added '*et in effetto il temp fu cattivo e non si partero, e detta Calli e' una magara di importanza, che fa molto magaire*'. Cassar also accused a close friend of Calli, Sevasti Landolina, who had at one time been the carnal friend of the Italian knight Bonviso. Sevastulla had, at some time in the past, asked Calli to prepare a love potion for her. Cassar even accused the two women of having sprinkled salt in fire and thrust a black handled knife in a flower pot while invoking the stars. But the worst accusation was directed against Sevastulla, who reputedly kept a *manu pagana* – the hand of a pagan (probably meaning non-Christian) infant wrapped in pearls, silk, coral, gold thread and amber – in order to be loved by several men. Cassar asserted that he had seen the *manu pagana* and believed that Calli had procured it for Sevasti.



▲ This unusual 18th century engraving eloquently illustrates alchemy's dual nature, which is normally obscured in more elaborate symbolism.



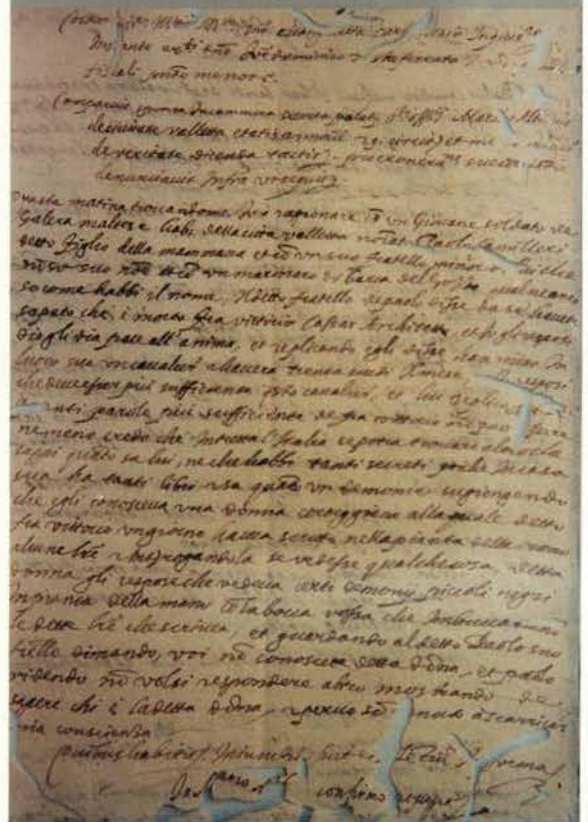
▲ Detail of a water colour by Salvatore Busuttil of Garzes Tower, Mgarr, Gozo which was built by Vittorio Cassar. The tower was demolished by the British in the 19th Century

That same month Vittorio Cassar was imprisoned at Fort St Elmo by the Holy Office, presumably due to his activities as necromancer. He told several members of the St Elmo garrison that the two women, Calli and Sevasti, had landed him in prison and that he would have justice on his release.

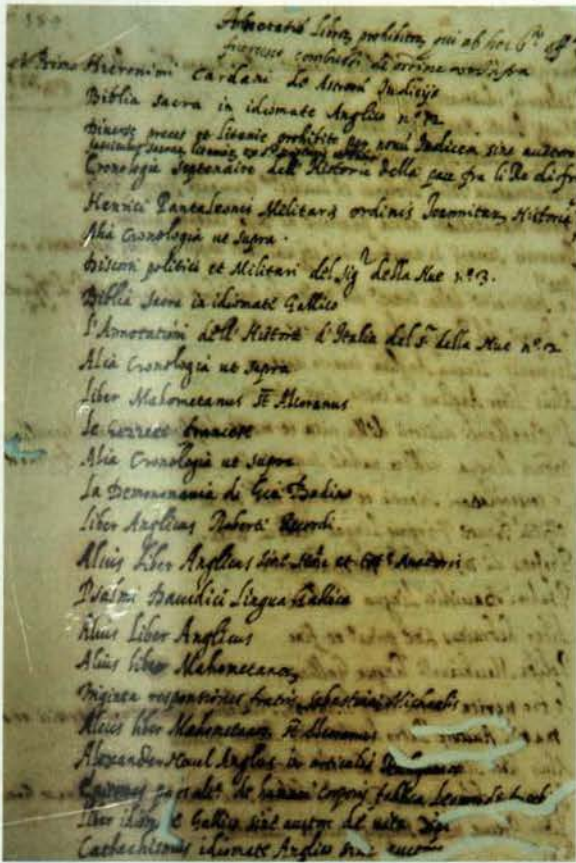
The relationship between popular and learned magic is a thorny question which can yield a great deal of information on popular and elite interactions in early modern Malta. It appears that in the early years of the Order's rule, the illiterate and the literate worlds were much closer, simply because belief in spirits and the supernatural formed the basis on which both learned and popular magic could develop; 'for it was possible to use their supernatural powers to protect oneself from aggression, predict the future and acquire wealth or love'. The belief in sympathetic magic and the occult versions of charms and incantations had their popular variations. So, if the *magara* recited incantations to heal the sick, the necromancer made use of the printed word which had power to control the disease.

Thus on 25 February 1608, the Gozitan priest Mattheo Zahra denounced Fra Vittorio of exorcising a Maltese woman from Zebbug in the Church of St John at the Gozo Castle. On this occasion, Fra Vittorio used a small hand-written black book which Don Mattheo assumed to be *il flagellum o' fustis Demonum*. Both Don Mattheo and Mastro Vincentio Liftech asserted that Fra Vittorio invoked the devils whom he commanded to leave the poor woman. Meanwhile, he ordered the woman to go back and forth on her knees from the door of the church to the altar, pulling her hair all the time while ordering the evil spirit to leave her body. Members of the clergy, like Don Mattheo, were obviously furious at such

“Magical practices offered men and women a ritual way of dealing with crisis situations which complemented, rather than competed against, the role of the Church in society, replying as it did on the sacred for its efficacy



▲ The death of Vittorio Cassar on 6th August 1609 was a subject of great gossip in the harbour towns of Malta as confirmed by this Inquisition document. Cassar was considered to be of great learning

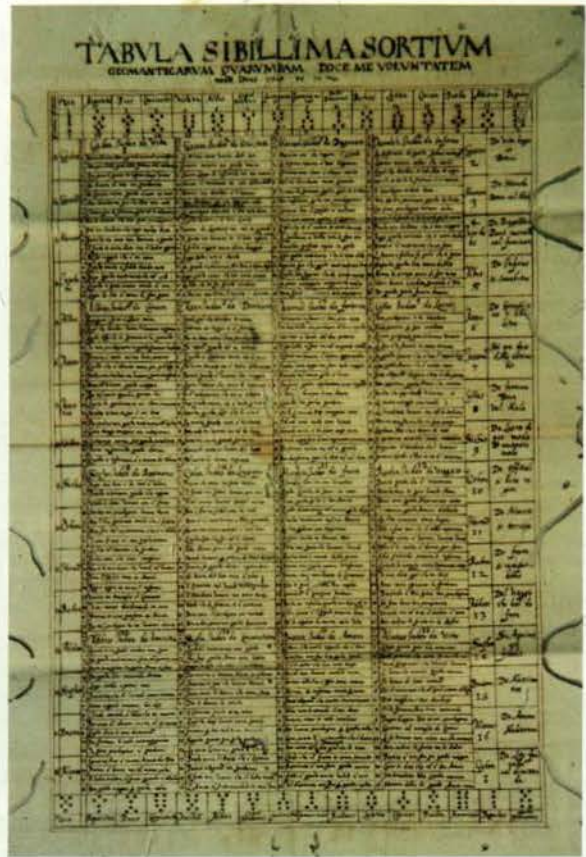


▲ Front page of a list of prohibited books burned by the Inquisition at the main square of Vittoriosa in May 1609

activities since exorcism was the realm of the clerics, even though as Mastro Litchch asserted, besides being a member of the Order of St John, Fra Vittorio was also a cleric of the first tonsure. Magical practices offered men and women a ritual way of dealing with crisis situations which complemented, rather than competed against, the role of the Church in society, replying as it did on the sacred for its efficacy.

Learned magic was an entirely male phenomenon (clerical and lay), with women as passive observers, although it too made use of the realm of the sacred by frequently employing priests to conduct the intricate ceremonies. It was a well-articulated cosmology which competed against the monopoly of official religion. When applied at the local level, it did not attempt to confront the existential crises with which popular magic frequently dealt. It concerned itself with the location of buried wealth, protection from bullets and its own type of love charisma, besides satisfying the needs of those who employed it.

It is evident that the common folk were strongly attracted to the magical resources of literacy and they often used writing to communicate with supernatural forces, “unofficially”,



▲ Tabula: Divination Table originally belonging to Vittorio Cassar. It was confiscated by the Inquisition and produced as evidence against Cassar in a case of Sorcery

without going through the proper ecclesiastical channels. No wonder that soon after the death of Fra Vittorio Cassar on 7 August 1609, Gioanne Camilleri, referring to the knight who had replaced Fra Vittorio Cassar, asserted

Piu sufficiente de Fra Vittorio non puo essere nememo credo che in tutta l'Italia se potra trovare altro che sappi quanto sa lui, ne che habbi tanti secreti poiche In casa sua ha tanti libri e sa quanto un demonio...

Thus, learned magic left a great impact on popular magic at both town and village level in Malta, despite the Church's firm opposition to both forms.

Ironically, popular magic, with no texts and comprehensive philosophical system, was to outlive its learned counterpart, surviving into the present day. The relation of popular magic, especially sorcery, to diabolical witchcraft has proved equally unshakeable. W

Transcribed by Victoria-Melita Zammit from Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition: A Study of Cultural Values in Early Modern Malta, Carmel Cassar, Msida, Minerva Publications 1996