

Filial Churches in Malta: A Historico-Artistic Outline

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Introduction

Malta's cultural and religious identity is expressed in the architectural heritage present around the Islands. 'A church for each day of the year!' echoes in the town's main piazza when the elderly meet and proudly discuss their Christian Catholic roots and St Paul's christening of the Mediterranean Maltese archipelago. To testify to this, there is the Maltese rural landscape which is enriched with a vast number of churches and chapels, still resisting the hourglass, thanks to their guardians who strive to cultivate and preserve them. Unfortunately, a good number of these structures were transformed into storage places or even abandoned, thus suffering consequent extensive dilapidation.

This bold and incisive architectural heritage has led to mark our history and has inspired a series of papers and publications by a number of local and foreign authors who trace their origins, how they flourished and how some perished. This analysis aims to contribute to the study on filial churches in Malta and open the way for further research about their history, architecture and works of art. Nonetheless, this study does not feature a detailed individual assessment of all the filial churches present on the Islands. The multitude of such exemplars stretches research boundaries to a limit which is beyond the purpose of this exercise.

Case studies based on an assiduous research in both Church and State archives maps Malta's socio-religious and political outline from the late fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, the account takes note of the present architectural and artistic conservation of some of the still-standing structures and echoing religious cults and traditions related to them.

The primary sources consulted for this study include pastoral visitation reports¹ preserved at the Cathedral Museum Archives at Mdina, the archives at the Archiepiscopal Curia at Floriana and other parish archives.² Secondary sources were also consulted. Amongst them, is the study compiled in 1866 by Achille Ferres, which is considered to be one of the most important studies dealing with filial churches in Malta.³ Unfortunately, it is not possible to trace Ferres's affirmations due to his lack of references to primary sources.

Valid contributions featured in mainstream and parochial publications also shed light on the subject such as the ones featuring Maltese ecclesiastical architecture by Quentin Hughes, Mario Buhagiar, Leonard Mahoney and Michael Ellul. The validity of this study lies in promoting Malta's filial churches as a national heritage in need of more attention in terms of preservation and rehabilitation.

1 Archives of the Archdiocese, Malta (AAM), Visitationes Pastoralis (VP) 5 (Pietro Dusina, 1575-1576); AAM VP 7 (Tommaso Gargallo, 1588-1602); AAM VP 8 (Balthassar Cagliares 1615); AAM VP 13 (Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa 1635-1637); AAM VP 14 (Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarasa 1635-1637); AAM VP 22 (Michael G Molina, 1678-1680); AAM VP 24 (Fra David Cocco Palmieri, 1685-1687); AAM VP 33 (Fra Paulus Alpheran de Bussan, 1736-1740); AAM VP 34 (Fra Paulus Alpheran de Bussan, 1744-1751); AAM VP 37 (Bartholomeus Rull, 1758-1760); AAM VP 38 (Fra Joannes Pellerano, 1771-1774); AAM VP 39 (Fra Vincentius Labini, 178); AAM VP 49 (Fra Ferdinando Mattei, 1813-1820); AAM VP 50b (Fra Maurus Caruana, 1832-1836).

2 Mainly *Esiti* and *Introiti* documents related to the churches.

3 Achille Ferris, *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866).

Etymology, Conquests and Re-Christianisation

The Maltese medieval context to the word *cappella* (in Maltese 'kappella') is actually what stands for today's small church.⁴ The Maltese term 'kappillan' (derived from 'cappellano', Italian for 'parish priest') refers to the priest who looks after the 'kappella'.⁵ Through the ages, church architecture in Malta constantly evolved and, concurrently, the terminology changed also. The small 'kappella' was substituted by a bigger structure; the 'knisja' (derived from 'chièsa', meaning: 'adunanza, assemblea', Italian for 'church'), to cater for the evolving needs of an ever-growing religious community.⁶ Consequently, the term 'kappella' was used as a diminutive term directed to the smaller churches present in the town or countryside.

Politically, Malta's Middle Ages are often still treated by academics and researchers alike as a time of uncertainty and debate. According to the anonymous Arabic Chronicle of Cambridge, which covers the years 827–965 CE, Malta was invaded by the Arabs, or, as similar reliable sources claim, was relieved from the Byzantines on 29 August, 870 CE.⁷ Very limited information is available on the then-current situation of the Maltese inhabitants forcing us to remain in the field of supposition. Two highly archaeological sensitive sites of San Pawl Milqgħi (Burmarrad) and Tas-Silġ (Marsaxlokk) reveal signs of destruction at levels corresponding to these years but it is very hard to wind-up the extent of such disruptions.⁸ Presumably, in this scenario,

4 'cappella' in Vocabolario - Treccani <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cappella1>> (accessed 29 October 2020).

5 'cappellano' in Vocabolario - Treccani <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cappellano>> (accessed 29 October 2020).

6 'Chièsa' in Vocabolario - Treccani <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/chiesa>> (accessed 29 October 2020).

7 'It Happened This Month: The Arab Conquest of Malta in 870', *Times of Malta* <<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/it-happened-this-month-the-arab-conquest-of-malta-in-870.730621>> (accessed 29 October 2020). Another source, *Kitab al-Unun*, dates the Arab conquest to just one day before the date cited by the Chronicle of Cambridge, that is, August 28. A fourth source, Ibn al-Athir, describes it as a relief operation.

8 Mario Buhagiar, 'The Early Christian Remains at Tas-Silġ and San Pawl Milqī,

the insulars may have fled to the southern regions of Italy whereas the remaining Christian population may have been expelled from the islands as retribution for assisting the Byzantines.

Records by both Harbi Al-Himyari (7th and 8th century CE) and Ibn Hawqal (died after 977 CE) refer to Malta as an “uninhabited ruin”.⁹ Nevertheless, by the turn of the tenth century, Malta stood at the heart of a political and commercial route between Sicily and the city of Al-Mahdiya in Tunisia. Most probably, the Islands served as a service-stop-destination in an ever-growing trade route amid the Mediterranean basin.¹⁰ Al-Himyari documents that Malta was visited by shipbuilders, because the wood in it was of the strongest kind; by fishermen, because of the abundance and excellent taste of the fish around the island’s shores; and by those who collected honey because that was the most common and available natural product.

Even so, documents indicate that by 1039 CE, Malta was still heavily inhabited. It is still a matter of hot debate whether the archipelago served either under a Christian or Muslim rule. Contrarily, Ben Ghadhary Al Marrakeshi reported that Malta had an important fleet which was active across the Mediterranean, casually hinting that the islands were well populated and remained strategically important after 870 CE.¹¹

Malta: A Reconsideration of the Archaeological Evidence’, *Melita Historica* 11, no. 4 (1996), 1-41.

- 9 Harbi al-Himyari was an Arab scholar from Yemen who lived between the 7th and 8th centuries AD. He made a name for himself as being the teacher of the prolific Islamic alchemist Jābir ibn Hayyān. Ibn Hauqal was a geographer who visited Sicily at some time between 960 and 980 and included in his writings aspects of Maltese historiography.
- 10 Sicily and Africa had close and growing economic ties during the period 1050–1150. The Sicilians imported gold, shipped by caravans across the Sahara to Kairouan (Qayrawan) and Al-Mahdiya, and cloth manufactured of Egyptian and local flax or cotton imported from India and Sicily. Besides this cotton, the Sicilians exported large quantities of wheat, cheese and processed meats.
- 11 His actual name is disputed while his date of birth is also unknown. He grew up in Marrakesh at the end of the Al Muwahhadin era. He died in the year AH 695 (1286 CE). The manuscript was discovered and translated by Frans X. Cassar.

At the turn of the eleventh century, Malta did not pass unseen to the Norman forces who invaded Palermo in Sicily in 1071.¹² In fact, in 1091, Roger I of Hauteville (c.1031-1101), the Norman Count of Sicily, raided the islands and put under threat the Muslim rule. Consequently, Muslims were allowed to remain at the expense of a tribute which was to be paid annually to the Norman ruler. The final nail in the coffin for the Muslim community resident in Malta landed in 1127, when Count Roger's son, King Roger II (1095-1154), took over Malta and started its Latinisation, both political and religious. Still, Islam remained present on the islands for over another century.¹³ The presence of Latin, Classical Arabic and Greek as the official languages of Malta and Sicily testifies to this.¹⁴

The re-Christianisation of Malta was triggered by the new rulers. The process was not an easy one considering that the local language was a Semitic one derived from Arabic and devoid of Punic elements. This language was still in use by the Muslims residing in Malta who after the 1249 CE¹⁵ expulsion, instead, opted to renounce their religion and embrace Christianity to remain living on the islands which, after all, was the homeland where they had been born and bred.

During this period, two different Christian rites co-existed; the Greek Byzantine rite was professed by the Greek Basilian monks

12 Roger of Sicily invaded Palermo in 1071. Nonetheless, though the city was captured, its citadel did not fall until January 1072. Robert Guiscard Hauteville, Roger's elder brother, invested him as Count of Sicily under the jurisdiction of the Duke of Apulia. In 1077 Roger besieged Trapani, one of the two remaining Saracen strongholds in the west of the island. In 1091, Roger landed in Malta and subdued the walled city of Mdina. He imposed taxes on the islands but allowed the Arab governors to continue their rule.

13 In 1175 CE, Bishop Burckhard of Strasbourg, an envoy of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I on his journey to the Holy Land, described the local inhabitants as Saracens, or rather, Muslims.

14 In 1127 Roger II abolished the Muslim government, replacing it with Norman officials. Under Norman rule, the Arabic spoken by the Greek Christian islanders for centuries of Muslim domination progressed in what later was to become the Maltese language, a living reminder of the time when the Maltese islands were under Muslim domination.

15 The date is according to Ibn Haldun.

who originated from southern Italy and settled on the Islands; and the Latin (Western) Church, favoured by the Normans, which was practised mainly among the rulers and aristocrats who settled in the city of Mdina and its precincts.¹⁶

Places of Worship: From Natural Settings to Free Standing Structures

The first places of worship (churches) in Malta were set up in natural caves which were duly adapted to fit the purpose. These countryside churches were purposely set to serve the farming communities present in those particular areas.¹⁷ Generally, these communities were led by a '*raħeb*', a Semitic term referring to the village headman who usually was the oldest member of the community and was thus acknowledged as the wisest man amongst his peers. These communities flourished in the Maltese countryside and became known as '*irħula*' (plural of '*raħal*') which carried the name of its '*raħeb*'.

A handful of rock-cut churches still survive today. They are mostly found in the northern stretch of the Islands with examples being the church of St Paul the Hermit at Wied il-Għasel in Mosta, Ġebel San Pietru near Naxxar, Għar San Niklaw near Mellieħa, Ġebel Ciantar near Siggiewi and the Marian shrine dedicated to The Nativity of the Virgin in Mellieħa. The early Christian catacomb complexes of St Paul and St Agatha in the Rabat area, which date back to the fourth century AD, were also modified into rock-cut churches. In fact, in both cases, a crypt at the entrance of the burial complexes was hewn in rock and served as an underground *basilica*, that is, the place where the congregation held its meetings.¹⁸

16 Throughout the 11th century, religiously, the East and West co-existed in a friendly relation. The two factions of Christendom were not yet aware of the number of differences which were to separate them at a later date. In the 11th and 12th centuries there was no single event marking the breakdown. Rather, the two churches slithered into and out of schism over a period of several centuries, punctuated with temporary reconciliations.

17 B. W. Blouet, 'Rural Settlement in Malta', *Geography* 56 (1971), 112–118.

18 Mario Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2005).



Figure 1: Ghar San Niklaw Caves, Mellieħa, Malta. The ‘San Niklaw’ troglodytic settlement is rooted in the sides of Mellieħa Ridge and overlooks Ġhadira Valley and Marfa Ridge. This cave settlement can be reached via a footpath branching from the Mellieħa bypass which from Ġhadira Valley leads to Mellieħa Ridge. The toponym of the fields surrounding this area is that of ta’ San Niklaw.

The first documented reference to a built church in Malta is found on a portolan chart that dates back to 1296.¹⁹ To be precise, the original church dedicated to Santa Marija, built on the small island of Comino, is the first such recorded free-standing structure and was considered to be a landmark for pilots and navigators at sea; it dominated a bay that still bears its name.²⁰

The earliest built churches were very straight-forward ashlar structures, relatively unadorned and usually consisting of a square room. The simplicity of the structure was largely crowned by an apse which was built on the east end of the church, generally cylindrical in

19 The term ‘portolan’ originates from the Italian adjective ‘portolano’ which refers to materials or objects related to ports or harbours. They were first made in the thirteenth century in Italy, and later in Spain and Portugal. The portolan chart referring to Comino is in the National Maritime Museum and Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London.

20 The Santa Marija Chapel in Comino was first recorded in a mid-thirteenth century navigational map and is situated in a bay that bears its name. The present chapel was built in 1618 in line with the building of the Santa Marija Tower. The building was further enlarged in 1667 and again in 1716 when the dedication of the church was shifted to ‘The Return of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Egypt’. However, both the chapel and the bay continued to be called by its former dedication: ‘Ta’ Santa Marija.

shape but, in some exclusive cases, also built in squarish proportions. The churches were sheltered by slightly pitched roofs supported by shallow, pointed arches. The low doorway leading into the church was within a typically slightly pointed archway that reflected the lingering medieval Arabic architectural idiom.²¹

Over time, structurally, these churches suffered mutilations and extensive modifications to accommodate the needs of a growing population. Only a few doorways show their original features since most of them have been either heightened or re-cut to a square-headed shape.

Early fifteenth-century records document Malta's thriving rural districts which were constantly prospering thanks to an ever-growing farming community and other maritime-related activity. In 1436, Bishop Senatore De Mello de Noto, during his pastoral visit around the Maltese islands, appointed a commission of cathedral canons to draw up a list of benefices in Malta. In his inventory *Quinterniolus Pro Concordia Taxarum*, he noted that besides the cathedral church, which was the only large church on the island, there were ten parishes. The ten distinct churches mentioned in the 'rollo' (list), presumably acted as parishes in their respective villages, ever since earlier days.²²

21 *Quentin Hughes, The Building of Malta* (London: Alec Tiranti Ltd, 1956). The entrances at San Ċir (limits of Rabat), lack the hood-moulding that is such a prominent feature crowning the entrances at Hal-Millieri, Birmiftuh and Hax-Xluq. Instead the main entrance at San Ċir consists of solid skilfully jointed masonry, sculpted in an elliptical form as was also the entrance at San Mikiel is-Sinċier (Bubaqra) (destroyed) and the West doorway at Santa Dominica (Zabbar) before alteration.

22 Folio 313 from *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano: Con le sue Antichità, ed altre Notizie*. Giovanni Francesco Abela first published in 1647 of the manuscript *Anno Domini MCCCCXXXVI: Ordinatus fuit, et est preasens quinterniolus pro concordia taxarum, praecipiente et mandante Reverendissimo Domino Episcopo Senatore* compiled in 1436 by Bishop and Senator De Mello de Noto (National Library Malta, Library 721, f. 2rv.) Besides the medieval Cathedral at Mdina and the Church of *San Lorenzo a Mare* at Birgu, the following chapels are mentioned: Naxxar (Nativity of the Virgin), Birkirkara (St Helen), Qormi (St George), Bir Miftuh (Assumption of the Virgin), Zebbug (St Philip of Aggira), Siggiewi (St Nicholas of Bari), Zejtun (St Catherine of Alexandria), Zurrieq (St Catherine of Alexandria), Hal-Tartani (St Domenica) and Mellieha (Nativity of the

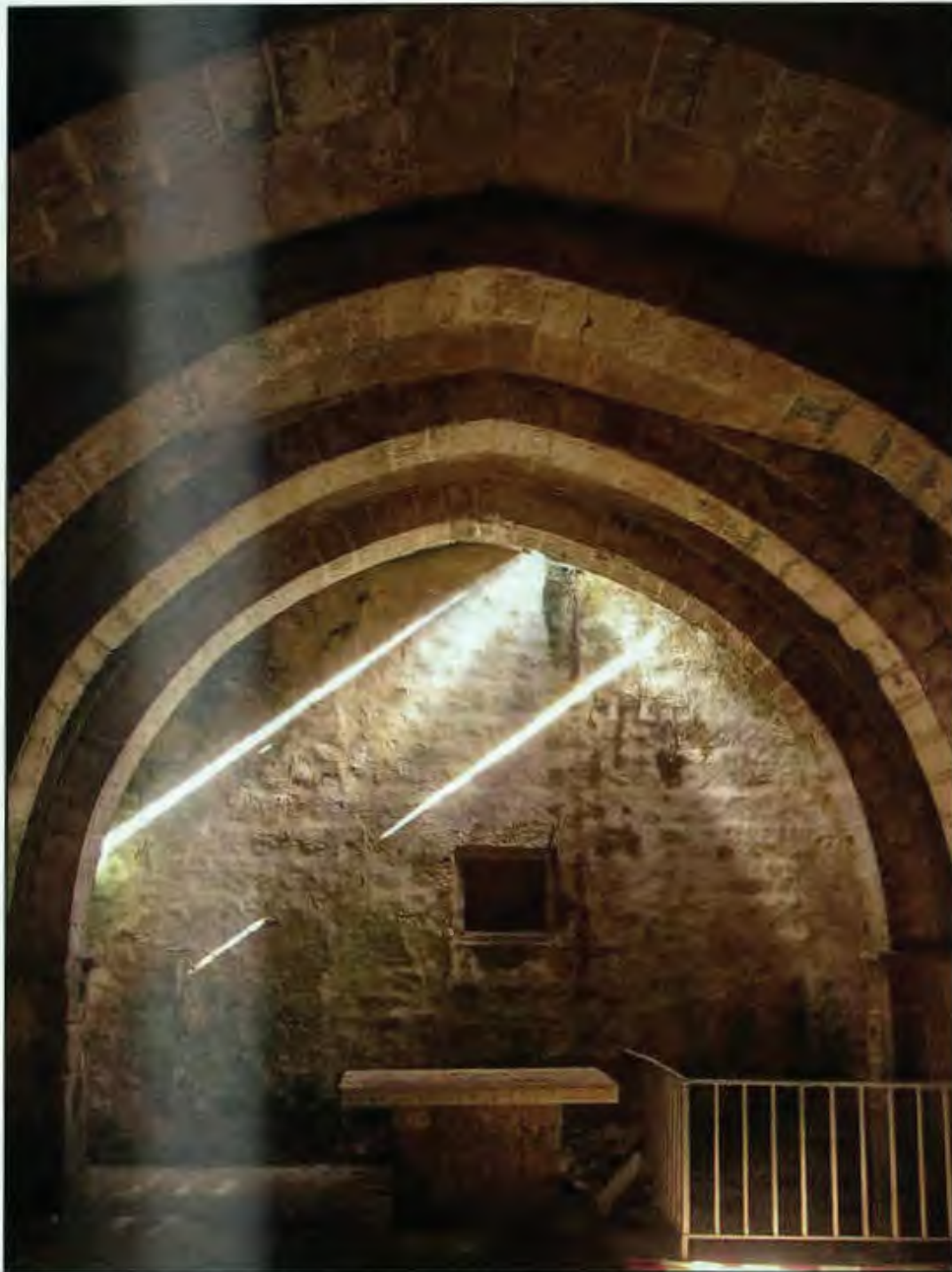


Figure 2: San Mikiel is-Sanċir Church (Interior), 15th Century, Rabat, Malta. The Chapel of St Michael, also known as 'Il-Kappella tas-San Ċir' or 'Il-Kappella ta' San Mikiel is-Sanċir' is a medieval chapel located in the limits of Rabat, Malta in an area referred to as 'Ġnien is-Sultan' (The King's Garden).

Architecturally, churches built during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, included doors on the side façades in addition to the ones at the front. These entrances adjoined abutting churches and, in particular cases, gave access to burial grounds. A case in point is the medieval church dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin at Hal Millieri, limits of Żurrieq, which abutted to three other churches which stood in the area. Only two of these remain standing; the churches of the Annunciation and St John the Evangelist.²³ Similarly, in 1456, the medieval building structure of the parish church of St George in Qormi is documented to have undergone drastic modifications. It is noted that the restructured medieval edifice abutted, and most probably interconnected, two older churches dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin and St Michael.²⁴

The lingering medieval architectural idiosyncrasy echoing the austerity and fear which the insular inhabitants manifested due to the Muslim corsair attacks that infested the Mediterranean littoral remained present in rural church structures throughout the second half of the sixteenth century. Furthermore, churches were built with double walls and having no windows except for a small slit to allow the structure some ventilation. The lack of windows resulted in having poorly illuminated churches.

Some medieval churches included the '*dukkiena*', an added feature which served as stone benches running along the sides of the church. The floor itself was either covered with flagstones or commonly laid with beaten earth known as '*torba*', a composition of soil mixed with stone chips, which was then covered by a thin film of lime and

Virgin). See T. Cortis, Th. Freller, L. Bugeja, eds., *Melitensium Amor: Festschrift in Honour of Dun Ġwann Azzopardi* (Malta: s.n., 2002).

23 Anthony Thornton Luttrell, *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings* (Malta: Midsea Books, 1976). The chapel was consecrated in 1480. During Mgr Pietro Dusina's apostolic visit to Hal-Millieri, in 1575, he found that the church was in a state of good repair, had three altars and paved. However, he found that the church was not equipped with sacred vestments, income or even a rector. At his order, the side altars were removed.

24 Hilary Spiteri, *Filial Churches in Malta: Qormi, a Case Study* (Malta: Horizons, 2016), 39.

clay. Some of the churches were built for posterity and occasionally had some graves dug in the main floor. However, burials generally took place in graves set outside the church, under the parvis, locally known as 'zuntier'.

Mgr. Pietro Dusina arrived in Malta in 1574, the first general inquisitor and apostolic delegate for the Maltese islands. In 1575, during his apostolic visits across Malta and Gozo, Mgr. Dusina drew up a detailed report about the state and conservation of the established churches.²⁵ He documented 430 churches built on the Islands.²⁶ This large number reflects a thriving period in the church-building industry generated during the fifteenth century and lingered to the first half of the next. The general condition of the structures documented by Dusina was compiled only a decade after the 1565 siege of Malta when nearly all the churches outside the urban areas had fallen to the Turks who ransacked them. Consequently, during the seventeenth century, a good number of the said churches were neglected and abandoned resulting in a poor state of preservation.²⁷

Mgr. Dusina's report stresses Malta's deprived liturgical and cultural conscience. In fact, during his apostolic visit, Dusina noted the dimmed ambience then-present in local churches and he ordered the insertion of an '*oculus*' (an eye-like opening) above the main door to function as a source of light inside the church.²⁸ Liturgically, Dusina

25 This information was gathered from the *Visitationes Apostolicae et Pastorales* preserved at the Cathedral Archives in Mdina which contain the pastoral visitation reports drawn up since 1570 by Bishops or Vicars General or Capitular. The collection includes a series of three volumes by Mgr. Pietro Dusina noting his apostolic visitation carried out in 1575. Four other volumes contain inventories of Church property, pious foundations and burdens.

26 Leonard Mahoney, *5000 Years of Architecture in Malta* (Malta: Valletta Publishing, 1996). Mgr. Dusina's report is considered to be a very important record which includes a detailed description of the Maltese churches present at the time.

27 Mario Buhagiar in Kilin, *A Hundred Wayside Chapels of Malta and Gozo* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2000), p. xi.

28 The '*oculus*' (Latin word for 'eye'), a small window, that could have been circular or oval in shape, became a main source of light which features in Maltese post-1575 churches. When in 1575 Mgr. Dusina visited all the churches around Malta and Gozo, he lamented that the churches were not sufficiently lit and '*oculi*' had to be

was after theatrically enhancing the religious rite, adding an architectural feature which allowed natural light into the edifice to emphasise the ceremony and represent divinity (focussing light towards the altar at dusk).

He also stated that none of the churches was endowed with bells and bellcotes, an integral part of divine worship, both to sound a joyful noise before the Lord and to ward off evil spirits. In Qormi, the church dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin known as Tal-Hlas was an exception to the rule.²⁹ Most probably, the absence of bells coincided with the poverty inherent in churches and chaplains had to make do without them. One might also consider the hypothesis that any existent bells were originally taken by the Turks and melted to found cannons or other military paraphernalia. Church interiors were generally left bare except for an altar which stood at the east end.

The arrival of the Jerosomolitan Order of St John in Malta in 1530 introduced a new and early modern architectural language. Their refined sense of artistic awareness was at par with Europe's mid-sixteenth century cultural identity. Distinct members of the Order were themselves patrons of filial churches. The Knights originated from aristocratic families who cultivated a love for works of art. Nonetheless, in Malta, the 1560s marked a difficult economic period, the cause and effect related to the devastations of the Ottoman siege. Furthermore, the decrease in population did not help the rehabilitation of the towns and villages.

opened on the western façades of the churches. This was later given a theological interpretation, symbolising the watchful eye of God. The designs of the 'oculi' varied, with some being simple and others being heavily ornamental.

- 29 The church dedicated to The Assumption of the Virgin known as tal-Hlas in Qormi was originally built in the late 1560s, under the patronage of the Bali of Lango, Fra Christophe le Boulleur de Montgauldry and lieutenant of Grand Master Pietro de Monte for the newly-built city of Valletta – who lived in Valletta in a house in Strada del Palazzo corner with Strada San Giovanni (nowadays South Street corner with Old Bakery Street). He rebuilt the church and added a small house for the rector. In 1575, Mgr. Pietro Dusina described the church as being a 'magnificent church' (*magnifica ecclesia*) having wooden doors, a bell and all necessary liturgical objects and necessities. Julianio Sbigeni was appointed by Fra Mongoudion to act as the procurator of the church. Mgr. Dusina remarked in his report that the church was already a popular Marian shrine at that time and was regularly visited by pilgrims.



Figure 3: The Assumption of the Virgin Tal-Hlas, Late 17th Century, Qormi, Malta. The church dedicated to The Assumption of the Virgin known as ‘Tal-Hlas’ is a very much sought-after Maltese Marian shrine. The area of ‘Ta’ Hlas’ recalls the ruins of an elder settlement known as ‘Herba tal-Hlas’.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Knights of St John marked a new beginning for Malta’s social identity and ecclesiastical history. The building of new parish churches towering above the local townhouses and overlooking the surrounding rural areas came into being. Maltese master masons displayed their skill and acquired confidence in the building of new parish churches in line with the architectural renewal and refined artistic taste triggered by the Order of St John. The building of the majestic Conventual Church in the heart of the newly built Baroque city of Valletta was a fine example to follow.

The early seventeenth-century economic progress facilitated the building of new parish churches. Unfortunately, this also led to the neglect and desecration of several filial churches across the Islands. As a result, these structures were despoiled of any artistic and liturgical accretions which were duly transferred to the respective parish

church.³⁰ Contrastingly, others were modified, rebuilt, or regenerated. Stone-carved decorations endowing these churches, which were similar to those found on the parish church façades, testify to this architectural renewal.

In 1675-76, the Maltese islands were devastated by an epidemic of bubonic plague that silenced an estimated 11,300 people out of a population of less than 60,000.³¹ During this period, peripheral filial churches across the islands were repurposed as the so-called '*chiesa infetta*' or central point from where Holy Sacraments were administered to the diseased. Despite the outbreak of the plague, which endured for eight months and receded in August 1676, Malta's economic situation remained stable and larger filial churches dedicated to the Virgin and plague saints, like St Roche and St Sebastian, were constructed as votive remembrances.

During the late seventeenth century, upon easing the devastations caused by the plague, Malta gave in to further distress. On January 11, 1693, a huge tremor shook the coastal area of Sicily bordering the Straits of Messina, which separates Sicily from the southern tip of the Italian Peninsula. The earthquake killed roughly between 60,000 and 93,000 people in Sicily and destroyed many historic cities and sites. The Knights of Malta suffered considerable damage to several galleys that were sailing between Sicily and Malta and ended up being grounded on the shore at the city of Augusta.

In Malta, this was the most damaging earthquake that has affected the Islands since 1500. The event is extensively documented in the National Archives of Malta, the cathedral archives, records of the Università' and other archives of religious orders. The information was also reproduced by Giovanni Francesco Abela in his book *Malta illustrata, ovvero descrizione di Malta ... Con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie, divisa in quattro libri, del Commendatore F. Giovanfrancesco*

30 On several occasions, objects were upcycled and reutilised.

31 Joseph Micallef, *The Plague of 1676: 11300 Deaths* (Malta: 1985), 118. Reference also noted in the George Childs Kohn, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Plague and Pestilence: From Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008).

Abela ... corretta, accresciuta, e continovata dal Conte Giovannantonio Ciantar, published in 1772.

The chief engineer of the Order, Mederico Blondel (1628-1698), assisted by two Capo Mastri, formulated a report after the catastrophe stating that in Valletta there was not one house that did not need some repair. The façades adorning major buildings were detached from the main structure and needed immediate repair due to an imminent danger of collapse. Some churches suffered collapse or major damage to their domes and severe cracks in walls. Several houses in Valletta also suffered seriously from cracked walls and some had to be demolished.

Serious damage was also accounted in the old medieval city of Mdina where the cathedral suffered a partial collapse and many other buildings suffered irreversible destruction.³² Reportedly, filial churches, which by that time were acclaimed devotional rural centres, suffered extensive damage and were either rebuilt, mostly incorporating the remnants of previous structures or reconstructed following a new (sometimes also amplified) plan.³³

During this period, in complement to the rebuilt *fabbricæ* which were mostly endowed with Baroque decorative architectural elements, patrons and rural communities alike directed their attention to the interior. It was a time when refined artistic taste exhibited by prolific members of the Order of St John brought about an influx of imported art that reached the islands from key countries across Europe (mainly Italy, Spain, and France). In return, such acquisitions shaped how church art was to be perceived, not only in the Order's institutions but likewise in other parish establishments. The infusion of a newly reformed spirituality, blended with high-level artistic practice,

32 It should be noted that there are several remarks in the reports that show that many of the buildings in the old city of Mdina which were very old and had been neglected for many years. In particular, the 13th century Metropolitan Cathedral was already showing serious signs of disrepair before the earthquake, and plans had in fact already been drafted for its rebuilding before 1693.

33 Conrad Gerald Thake, 'Mdina: Architectural and Urban Transformations of a Citadel in Malta,' (unpublished Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 1997).

challenged and progressed local artistic production which found its way into rural filial churches.

Home-grown artists like Stefano Erardi (1630–1716), Giuseppe D'Arena (c. 1633–1719), Enrico Regnaud (1692–1764), Gio. Nicola Buhagiar (1698–1752), Francesco Zahra (1710–1773) and Rocco Buhagiar (1725–1805) fulfilled commissions for both the Church and the Order.³⁴ As a result, the combination of artworks produced by both foreign and Maltese artists present on the islands was admired, and definitely exerted a marked influence on the vernacular (generally linked to embellishments present in filial churches). On the other hand, such acquisitions testify to the potential of rural communities to acquire works of art directly from local celebrated *botteghe* and at times, when patrons were of high standing, provenance points towards foreign artistic centres, mainly Rome.³⁵

In addition, main altar paintings were supplemented and hosted in stone carved reredoses that mainly follow a seventeenth-century Baroque idiosyncrasy.³⁶ Reredoses were embellished with columns, reliefs and statues mostly carved from local globigerina limestone. Sculptural decorations on reredoses and church façades showcased the work of local talented *scalpellini*. Two prominent Maltese families undertaking such work were the Fabri family from Birgu and the

34 Mario Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands, 1400–1900* (Malta: Progress Press, 1987).

35 Spiteri, *Filial Churches in Malta*. The altar painting present in the filial church dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, known as Tal-Hlas, in Qormi is a case in point. The painting representing the 'Assumption of the Virgin' and is dated 1729. It is also inscribed but, unfortunately, the writing is unrecognisable. Mgr Paul Alpheran de Bussan, in both manuscripts, recorded the painting and stated that it was produced in Rome and set in a wooden frame '*... eius icona inanis pictura facta Roma inter cornice.*' The work showcased the Italian Classical Baroque manner propagated in Rome by Carlo Maratta. The commission of the work coincides with a period when Malta lacked professional artists who could produce works of this competence. Instead, works were commissioned from abroad, mainly from Rome.

36 Giovanni Mangion, ed., *Maltese Baroque: Proceedings of a Seminar on 'the Baroque Route in Malta' held at the Ministry of Education, Beltissebħ, Malta, on 3rd June, 1989* (Beltissebħ: Ministry of Education, 1989).

Casanova family from Senglea.³⁷ Other renowned *scalpellini* were Pietro Paolo Zahra (1685-1747, the father of the prolific painter Francesco Zahra, Giovanni Attard, Domenico Azzopardi and Gio. Maria Saliba.³⁸

At the turn of the nineteenth century, across Europe and the Mediterranean, disputes associated with the French Revolution and its resultant struggle triggered a series of major conflicts placing the French Empire and its allies, against a shifting array of European powers. On June 10, 1798, the Maltese 'welcomed' Napoleon Bonaparte and his troops conquered Malta as part of a strategic design to dominate the Mediterranean, conquer Egypt and then gain India and the Far Eastern colonies of the British Empire.

The French domination proved to be short and turbulent since they fell short to what they initially promised. The radical reforms introduced by the new rulers were condemned to be excessive by the locals who were still largely subservient to two prominent institutions: the aristocracy and the Church. Napoleonic laws were viewed as a direct attack on the Church and a threat to the Maltese cultural identity.

Several towns suffered a great deal from the disregard imparted by the French establishment and towns were sacked by French soldiers forming part of the invading force. Parish churches were stripped and robbed from any valuable possessions and religious imagery was mocked and vandalised as documented in contemporary accounts. 'To make a show of his generosity (Napoleon Bonaparte), he returned to the bishop (Mgr. Vincenzo Labini) and to the canons all the churches which had been earlier stripped of their gold, silver and gems ...'³⁹ Filial churches situated in the vicinity of the parish church suffered the same fate.

37 Gabrielle Agius, 'Pietro Paolo Zahra and the Roman Baroque Manner at the Oratory of the Crucifix, Senglea' (unpublished BA (Hons) History of Art Dissertation, University of Malta, 2014).

38 Mangion, *Maltese Baroque*, 42.

39 Grazio V. Ellul, 'The French Invasion of Malta : An Unpublished Account', <<https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/20155>> (accessed 6 November 2020); Giovanni Azopardi, *Giornale della presa di Malta e Grozo, dalla Repubblica francese, e della susseguente rivoluzione della campagna* (Malta: 1836).

Within three months of the French capitulation, the Maltese revolted. The French were forced to withdraw behind the fortifications of Valletta and Cottonera. They remained besieged until September 1800 when they surrendered to the British navy and armed forces which assisted the Maltese in gaining their freedom.

The British fleet disembarked at the Grand Harbour and thus commenced an over one hundred and fifty years of British monarchical governance. Amidst this political shift, Malta is recorded to have registered an economic recession, especially when, in April 1813, the social collapse was further heightened by the severe epidemic of bubonic plague which, across the Islands, killed about 4,600 persons over a period of seven months. By July 1813, the plague was killing an average of 50 persons daily. Towns were pillaged by the infestation and suffered severely from military action forwarded to control the epidemic. Cordons were set up to barricade the cities and designated areas were put under martial law.⁴⁰

It seems quite clear that at least up till the nineteenth century, presumably heightened by the infiltration of the 'foreign' Protestant religion, filial churches played their part in the overall religious devotions of the parish as a whole as exemplified by their use in Lent and other public commemorations linked to the ecclesiastical calendar. In the past, several small processions of the faithful carrying statues and related paraphernalia ran across Maltese towns. Generally, processions halted on the parvis of the respective filial church where a sermon commemorating the event was delivered before returning to the parish church.⁴¹ Mostly, these processions were discontinued in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, the twentieth century marked a downgrade in the social significance of the filial churches by the parish establishments with several filial churches being converted into centres for daily services

40 Sir Arthur Brooke Faulkner, *A Treatise on the Plague: Designed to Prove It Contagious, from Facts, Collected During the Author's Residence in Malta, When Visited by That Malady in 1813* (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820).

41 Joseph Grima, *Holy Week Processions at St George's Parish, Qormi* (Malta, 2003), 9-11.

and catechism right up to living memory. Others suffered extensively when they were converted into stores housing *fešta* decorations and paraphernalia.

Conclusions and Considerations

Mgr Pietro Dusina arrived in Malta in 1574 as the first general inquisitor and apostolic delegate of the Maltese islands. A year later, he recorded in his pastoral visitation reports a total of 430 churches spread across the Islands. Questions arise to justify the abundant amount of churches built across Malta and Gozo considering that, during the Great Siege of 1565, a great part of the population had been massacred.

In 1575, Dusina lists Malta's population. To quote a few: Attard had a population of 665 villagers living in 165 houses; 300 people resided in 60 houses at Balzan, while Lija had 80 houses in which 400 persons lived. Żebbuġ, with its hamlets of Hal Dwil and Hal Muxi, had 260 dwellings housing 1,200 people; 60 persons lived in 17 houses at Hal Bordi while at Hal Man 50 villagers resided in 12 houses. Other population figures show 1,200 persons at Bormla and 800 at Rabat and Imdina. Sundry housing figures include 116 households at Mosta, 100 at Tarxien, 60 at Żabbar, 203 at Żurrieq, 15 at Hal Millieri, 130 at Luqa, 7 at Hal Manin, 54 at Qrendi, 22 at Hal Lew, 42 at Bubaqra, 20 at Hal Tartarni, and 80 each at Gharghur and Gudja.⁴²

In 1590, the Viceroy of Sicily Diego Enríquez de Guzmán, Count of Alba de Liste (1585-1592) ordered a census of the Maltese islands. The figures quoted list 24,523 persons over the age of five years, 4,341 under five years and 3,426 persons belonging to the Order or forming part of the crews of its ships. This amounts to a total population of 32,290. With this sparse populace inhabiting the Islands, one finds it difficult to justify the need for so many churches – an average of a church per 75 persons.⁴³

42 Joseph Cassar-Pullicino, 'Malta in 1575: Social Aspects of an Apostolic Visit', *Melita Historica* 2, no. 1 (1956), 19-41.

43 Juliet Bonnici, 'The Filial Churches of Żurrieq' (unpublished BA (Hons) History of

Documents reveal that, in their majority, these churches celebrated only one mass per annum. Furthermore, some other churches were built to serve as burial grounds both on the inside and on the outside (*zuntier*). The most plausible justification for the building of so many churches is that they served as ex-voto buildings, constructed as votive offerings generally to a saint. Churches were built in fulfilment of a vow or gratitude or devotion.⁴⁴

The churches were mainly intended to be used as shrines for daily religious veneration and pilgrimage. This hypothesis validates the number of churches reported by Mgr. Dusina which were not secured with doors and were thus easily accessible to passers-by. Subsequently, Dusina forbade the celebration of mass in churches that had no doors and ordered new ones to be installed. This ended free access to the visitors but which, in turn, paved the way to an architectural modification. Small side windows flanking the main doorway were included to ease veneration. Records show that pilgrims used to visit churches and pray while looking inside the church from the small side-windows. In some cases, holes in the walls were dug up next to these windows for offerings of sanctuary oil and money.

A thorough analysis of the pastoral visitation reports compiled by the Bishops of Malta document the existence of similar groups of churches clustered in different areas across villages which gradually metamorphosed into one church of larger dimensions when, on account of their decay, or for other causes, their reconstruction was considered necessary. Dilapidated chapels were demolished or incorporated within the main edifice, thus adding a new altar to it for the perpetual devotion of the saint formerly venerated in the demolished church, or instead represented through a painting or even a statue. This also resulted in amalgamating the revenues and endowments of the incorporated churches to the church which absorbed them. In return, accrued funds

Art Dissertation, University of Malta, 2002), 73.

44 Kilin, *A Hundred Wayside Chapels*, p. xi; Isabelle Borg, 'The Miraculous Image and the Ex-Voto Tabella in Malta' (unpublished MA History of Art Dissertation, University of Malta).

gave place to larger and more beautiful edifices.

There were also times when the multitude of churches built across Malta and Gozo was seen as a negative element which undermined public safety and civil stability. In 1757, Bishop Bartolomé Rull (1691 -1769), in response to the Order's Memorial regarding issues of immunity in Maltese and Gozitan churches, remarked that he validated all of Grand Master Manoel Pinto's (1681–1773) reservations regarding the immunity granted to villains in sanctuaries. The root of this distress, Mgr Rull confirmed, was the great multitude of churches in such a small diocese.

Both in 1656 and 1671, the Order of St John had manifested its concern that necessitated the reduction of these sanctuaries, but nothing had come of it. The eighteenth-century increase in the number of churches made the matter more urgent. Mgr Rull found no impediment on his part and he considered Grand Master Pinto's demand necessary and just. In 1761, the Holy See reduced the number of immune churches to a restricted few.

On January 10, 1761, Rome sent orders to the Maltese curia. Pope Clement XIII (1758-1769) cited the concordat of 1741 between the Holy See and Naples where he restricted local immunity to the parish and filial churches where the Holy Sacrament was kept. The Pope's main reasons for such conclusions were as follows:

the intolerable danger to the public peace; and the great number of churches in Malta, amounting to 327.

On May 30, 1762, the Maltese Curia published the Papal Edict as follows:

*Consulendum SSmo. pro declaratione, quod attentis peculiaribus circumstantiis Ecclesiae rurales in Insula Melevitana imposterum gaudere non debeant Immunitate Ecclesiastica exceptis Parochialibus, eorumque filialibus, ubi exercetur cura animarum, necnon illis in quibus asservatur Sanctissimae Eucaristiae Sacramentum, et apponantur lapides.*⁴⁵

45 AAM, Corr. XIV, ff. 439r-v; ACM, Misc. 53, ff. 64 r-v. See also Frans Ciappara, 'Non Gode l'Immunità Ecclesiastica: Sanctuary in Malta, c. 1740-1828, *European*

Parish priests were obliged to read out and explain the papal order to their congregations during high mass. On June 1, 1762, ecclesiastical officials were to fix a notice on the main doors of those churches which had lost their immunity.⁴⁶ This decision triggered several petitions by private owners who maintained churches across Malta and Gozo. As a result, on June 17, 1762, Mgr Rull issues an *errata còrrige* stating that the letter had referred only to rural chapels and not those within the towns and inhabited areas. He reinstated 162 churches to their former state of ecclesiastical immunity.⁴⁷ Finally, on April 10, 1828, the British government in Malta, as per official notice published in the Malta Government Gazette, repurposed and enforced the 1741 concordat which abolished this immunity permanently.⁴⁸

Nowadays, filial churches spread across the Maltese islands stand as a remembrance of our heritage and identity. These structures once stood as the fulcrum of our ancestors' lives and were full of constant activity. The Maltese, throughout their history, anchored their roots to these structures, a constant symbol of their religious beliefs amidst the multitude of different cultures imparted by the various colonists who dominated the Islands.

Unfortunately, these structures are not regarded as important as they were once held. Our society has grown to become more individualistic and seeks comfort in the self rather than in the collective identity sought by our forefathers. Nevertheless, in past decades, efforts have been made to reassess these structures and place them in their proper historical, social and artistic context. Various studies have been carried out to shed light on their validity and re-establish them as places, not necessarily of worship, but of spaces attracting modern-day social interaction battling a world of virtual communication. Certainly, this should reinstate these buildings to their former days of glory!

History Quarterly 38, no. 2 (2008), 227-43.

46 AAM, Editti vol. 10, ff. 180r-181v; ACM, Misc. 115, ff. 269 r-v.

47 AAM, Editti vol. 10, ff. 185r-188v.

48 'Malta Government Gazette', no. 896 (16 April 1928), 126; AAM, Corr. XLII, f. 59v.