

The Village of Żebbuġ, Gozo - Its Parish and Titular Statue

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Introduction

One of Gozo's most picturesque villages situated on the highest inhabited plateau of the island is undoubtedly the old village of Żebbuġ, the northernmost village of the island of the three hills and geographically the nearest village to the island of Sicily south of the Italian peninsula. During 2013, the parish belonging to this locality will be celebrating three important anniversaries, the first two of which are certainly significant for the history and culture of the area. The motto of the village is in Latin *Terra Sublimis* which liberally translated into English would be rendered as 'A high region' and in Maltese as *Art fil-ġholi*. The most popular rendering of the coat-of-arms of the locality is made up of two trees with three stars upon them.

A Name for a Place

The Maltese word *żebbuġ* refers to the popular olive tree which could have been introduced into our islands by the Arabs during their rule which spanned from c.870 to 1090 A.D. This village in the north of Gozo is not the only one to carry a name related to olives. The village to the west of Żebbuġ itself is known as Għasri, a Maltese word which most probably refers to the production of olive-oil. If one were to look into Maltese toponymy one would come across the village of Haż-Żebbuġ in the central area of the island and the village of Żejtun to the south; both names are related to the same theme. In the past Żebbuġ must have abounded with these kind of trees which are still to be found in big numbers in other areas of Gozo.

Żebbuġ in Old Documents

Żebbuġ is mentioned in Agius De Soldanis' second volume of his *Il Gozo Antico E Moderno, Sacro E Profano* compiled in 1746. Writing about the chapels abounding on the island, the father of Gozitan historiography refers to a chapel dedicated to the Baptist to be found in the region of Żebbuġ that was visited by the local bishop during a pastoral visit and which ended in 1630. De Soldanis refers again to the name when he writes about the newly-erected parish of Xagħra the territory of which overlapped with that of Żebbuġ. Later on in the book he dedicates a couple of pages to the parish of Żebbuġ and refers to it as the 'sixth parish in Gozo and the fourth to be created by Bishop Cocco Palmieri in 1688 with the small church dedicated to Mary's Assumption into Heaven'.



The Żebbuġ parish church from the south-east

However it is not only ecclesiastical documents which refer to the locality. In another publication of the late eighteenth century, Mario Bonello's *Descrizione Geografica dell'Isola di Sicilia e delle altre sue adjacenti* mentions the area in Gozo. The book starts with a brief overview of Gozo's ancient and medieval history since its agenda is in fact to include Gozo within the classical world of antiquity. As he mentions the various villages of Gozo, he refers to 'Zebbugh' and the bays of 'Marsa Ferno'. Dr. Thomas Freller in his *Gozo The Island of Joy*, states that Bonello dedicated a brief description to each site. In his *The Placenames of the Coast of Gozo*, researcher of toponymy Joe Zammit-Ciantar does not mention the village of Żebbuġ by name since the village itself is away from the sea but refers to the various geographical points that abound into the sea on Gozo's northern coast and which are popularly considered to form part of the territory of the village. 'Il-Qolla l-Bajda' with the nearby 'Għar ta' Santa Marija' and 'Wied il-Qlejgha' feature in Zammit-Ciantar's scholarly work. Żebbuġ is also mentioned in G. Calleja's *The Work of Art in the Churches of Malta and the Governor's Palace, Valletta*. The publication

refers to the 'Ġgantija taż-Żebbuġ' consisting of megalithic ruins in an enclosure behind the Żebbuġ, Gozo church (cfr. Bugeja, 2008: 35).

The Parish Church Dedicated to the Virgin

The main parish church of the village of Żebbuġ is to be found half way between the northern half and its southern equivalent; the former being referred to by the locals unto this day as 'ix-Xagħra l-Kbira' while the latter as 'Il-Ponta'. Żebbuġ is rich in its toponymy. The furthest point to the south of the parish church is the area known as 'Il-Kanun'. Not being able to prove the presence of any canon in the area, the word might be a corruption of 'kenun' which is an old version for the word 'kenur'. One should not forget that there is in Nadur an area known even today as 'Ta' Kenuna' characterized by its tower and which is also on a promontory – this is only a suggestion. In the north of the village are also to be found the areas known as 'Is-Sagħtrija' and Għajn Mhelhel, the word 'Mhelhel' probably referring to an Arab lord. The church dedicated to the Virgin was known as Santa Marija tal-Virtu but today is simply referred



The interior of the Żebbuġ parish church.

to as the Parish Church of the Assumption of the Virgin. One of the oldest pieces of art within the church is the picture of the Virgin standing with the palms of her hands over her breast; although this is known by the locals as 'Il-Kuncizzjoni', historical documents testify that it was made to depict the Virgin Assumed into heaven. The painting is quite similar to the titular painting at the Ta' Pinu Sanctuary.

In 2013 the parish community in Żebbuġ commemorated the 325th anniversary of the parish; it was on the 28th of April 1688 that the then Bishop of Malta and Gozo, Davide Cocco Palmieri, established four new parishes in Gozo, and Żebbuġ was one of them. Until then the people depended on the two parishes of Rabat for their spiritual needs. It was therefore joyous news for the locals to have their church erected to parish status. The first parish priest was the saintly Dun Frangisk Vella; his remains are revered in one of the side-chapels in the church. On the 28th of April 2013, the parish priest Can. Reuben Micallef unveiled a portrait of Bishop Cocco Palmieri painted by local painter Manuel Farrugia. In order to celebrate the anniversary, special festivities took place during the week preceding the titular feast which were celebrated on the 25th of August. During the fifteen days leading to the feast, all the parish-priests of Gozo – fourteen in all – were invited to say Mass and deliver a short commemorative homily.

The Titular Statue – 150 Years Old

The mid-nineteenth century was the period in which Gozo's ecclesiastical and cultural patrimony experienced a boost. In 1838 a statue of Saint George was commissioned as an external sign of thanksgiving; it was later adopted as the first titular statue on the island. Followed by St John the Baptist for the parish of Xewkija in 1845, and the statue of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin for the parish of Għarb in June 1853, the number of parishes commissioning titular statues on Gozo began to rise. The people of Żebbuġ were fortunate in having as their parish priest, Dun Ġwann Camilleri of Nadur, who having heard from emigrants in Marseille about the firm Gallard et Fils renowned for making statues, commissioned a statue of the Virgin being assumed into heaven for the parish in which he was in charge.



The Żebbuġ titular statue - The Assumption.

Dun Ġwann Camilleri was born in the parish of St Peter and St Paul in Nadur on the 9th of December 1830. He studied at the Seminary in Imdina and was ordained a priest by Bishop Publius Sant on the 20th of December 1856. It was on the 8th of March 1863 that Bishop Publius Sant of Malta installed Dun Ġwann as the parish priest of the Żebbuġ parish. He was the eighth parish priest of Żebbuġ. From the documents that have survived, one can conclude that Dun Ġwann was a priest with a strong will. It was only after a couple of months that he had been installed as spiritual leader of the parish, that Dun Ġwann decided to acquire a titular statue for his parish. During his short tenure as parish priest of Żebbuġ – a period of less than two years – Dun Ġwann managed to bring over from Marseille in France the statue of the Assumption. Until this very day, the statue of the Assumption venerated in Żebbuġ is considered one of the finest

among the titular statues of Gozo. In one of her poems about the village of Żebbuġ, Gozitan poet Mary Mejlak referred to the statue of St Mary in Żebbuġ as a statue of ‘rare’ beauty. She couldn’t have applied a better adjective since the statue does have a heavenly look about her. It was to be the first titular statue of the Assumption for Gozo, having arrived on the island just a year before the very establishment of the new diocese of Gozo by Pope Pius IX the following year – 1864. This year in order to commemorate the 150 years of the statue; the parish will be organising a procession aux flambeaux from the southern limits in the area just next to the parish cemetery to the main parish church.

2013 is also a special year for the history of the parish since it was back in 1963 that the parish priest Dun Franġisk Mercieca was honoured with the title of ‘archpriest’ thus ranking the parish church as ‘archpresbyteral’ and giving him the faculty of wearing the pectoral cross characteristic of archpriests.

Żebbuġ in Modern Times

Enjoying singular dominant views and picturesque areas, Żebbuġ has caught the eyes of entrepreneurs and land negotiators alike. The area known as ‘Is-Saghtrija’ on the north-eastern side of the village is now being developed into a modern sort of village. The commanding views peculiar to the area are perhaps the main source of attraction for the ‘village of Santa Marija’. The local onyx found in the locality which endows the parish church is a must for all who visit Żebbuġ. Żebbuġ can easily be referred to as the airiest village of Gozo, a perfect haven for lovers of peace and idyllic tranquillity.

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