

ON THE TRAIL OF THE BURIAL PLACE OF SURGEON MICHEL'ANGELO GRIMA

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Surgeon and physician Michel'Angelo Grima embellished the title-page of his *Della medicina traumatica* (Firenze, 1773) with an engraved vignette representing the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. The main features in this engraving are the blazing sun, the falling Icarus, and Daedalus with out-spread wings.

Daedalus was the builder of the labyrinth at Knossos commissioned by King Minos for the imprisonment of the bull Minotaur. Eventually Daedalus fell out with the king and he himself was locked in the maze with his son Icarus. Daedalus, however, constructed wings, held together by means of wax, for himself and his son. The two men thus succeeded to fly away from the maze to freedom but Icarus flew too near the sun and the wax of his wings melted away. He fell from the sky into the sea and was drowned.

Presumably by this legend M.A. Grima wanted to convey to the surgeon the importance of appreciating the overpowering forces of nature symbolised by the blazing sun; the uncertainty of the results of human endeavour shown by the falling Icarus; and the need for manual skill and experience represented by the successful flight of Daedalus. The myth, however, may also be interpreted as a symbol of the net of environmental events and personal circumstances in which each one of us becomes entangled as our life unfolds. Some of us succeed in struggling out of the maze into the open without our life history becoming overtaken by the tide of events like Daedalus; others, however, escape from the maze but through the intervention of environmental factors vanish from our ken, like Icarus, leaving several facets of our life enveloped in

obscurity. Grima belongs to this second category of men for inspite of an active surgical career, several aspects of his private and professional life remained undocumented such as the date and place of his birth; the whereabouts and the number of his published and manuscript works; and, until I embarked on the present trail, the location of his place of burial. Thus in choosing the Daedalus and Icarus moral as a lesson to his readers, M.A. Grima gave us an unconscious projection of some vicissitudes of his own life.

I begun to be immersed in the life of M.A. Grima in 1957 when I started to collect material for my *Medical History of Malta* (London 1965). Since then I have followed him wherever his arresting personality has led me and I have tried to track every clue that promised to solve the queries alluded to above. In spite of an almost compulsive persistence, documentary evidence relating to his place and date of birth still eludes me. I have, however, achieved a good measure of success in dealing with the second problem for I have recently managed to build up a bibliography of his works with the location of most of them (Cassar, 1974a).

I have now also resolved the third riddle as I am convinced that I have finally traced M.A. Grima to his grave. An excellent biographical study of M.A. Grima quotes the *Liber Mortuorum* of the Parish Church of St. Paul Shipwreck of Valletta to the effect that Grima died on the 25th August 1798 and was buried in the church of the Minor Observants of St. Francis of Valletta (Cassar Pullicino, 1949). I have confirmed the existence and contents of this document in the archives

of the Church of St. Paul but a search in the burial records and in the lapidary of the church of the Minor Observants for corroborative evidence of Grima's internment in this church proved fruitless. Thus the trail faded out unpromisingly until a few months ago when an unexpected vista came into sight.

While gathering sources for my study on the dispute between the Bishop of Malta and the Confraternity of SS. Cosmas and Damian in 1859 (Cassar, 1974b), I found out that several members of this confraternity belonged also to other non-professional sodalities which had a purely religious scope and which embraced men from all walks of life. I was aware that in 1764 M.A. Grima had defrayed the expenses of a reception held at the Holy Infirmary on the feastday of SS. Cosmas and Damian (Cassar, 1972) but I could not determine whether he was a member of the confraternity named after the two saints as the records of this association have disappeared. The thought, however, now occurred to me that he might have belonged, like other colleagues, to some other non-medical sodality possibly based on the church of the Minor Observants of St. Francis in Valletta.

Enquiries at this church elicited the information that a sodality, under the title of Archconfraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix, has been in existence there for the last three hundred years. This sodality had, in fact, been founded in 1646 and granted the *juspatronatus* of the Chapel of the Most Holy Crucifix. Its members comprised craftsmen, artists, businessmen, priests, professional men, Knights of St. John and even a few Grand Masters of the same Order. In such a company I also found M.A. Grima who, on the 28th August 1767, was appointed Rector of the confraternity as a substitute to Grand Master Fra Em. Pinto, an office which he held until 1771 (Scerri, 1932). Grima died within the fold of this confraternity to which he bequeathed, by way of a legacy, the sum of four hundred *scudi* (about eight cents *per scudo*) to be invested in the Monte di Pietà at the yearly interest

of 3%. In return the confraternity bound itself to have eighteen candles lighted on the altar of the Most Holy Crucifix and six on that of Our Lady of Sorrows on Good Friday; to celebrate a high mass on the anniversary of his death and a number of low masses at other times of the year (Ms. *Fondazioni legali*). This will, therefore, showed that a link existed between Grima and this church.

In November 1676 the members of the confraternity had decided to be interred together in the same burial place and for this purpose they acquired a number of graves that already existed in their chapel. In 1709 they demolished these graves and replaced them by an underground vault containing a new set of tombs. A marble tablet, let into the floor of the Chapel of the Most Holy Crucifix, records in a Latin inscription the internment of members of the confraternity in the underlying burial chamber.

The evidence gathered up to this stage of my investigations firmly established that M.A. Grima belonged to the confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix; that members of this sodality had decided in 1676 to be buried together in a common vault; that in 1709 they constructed a crypt in the chapel already mentioned for their internment; and that M.A. Grima was a member of the confraternity at the time of his demise. It now remained to prove that M.A. Grima was actually buried in this crypt.

One way of tracing this proof was to examine the records of the confraternity but none of those that have survived contain any references to Grima's burial. However, in another collection of registers recording the number of masses said for the repose of the souls of the members of the confraternity, are listed the various masses offered for the "late citizen" M.A. Grima between the 26th August, the day following his death, and the 25th September 1798 (Aquilina, 1974). Here, therefore, was further evidence of Grima's close association, after his death, with the church of the Minor Observants of St. Francis, although it was no pointer to the location of his grave.

A visit to the crypt offered the possibility of finding an inscription marking the tomb where his remains lay. The crypt is no longer accessible from the church as its entrance was blocked some years before 1940 when the present marble floor of the church was being laid down. There is now only one means of communication with the crypt — an aperture behind the picture of Our Lady of Sorrows in the niche on the St. Ursola Street side of the church. On removing the picture, however, the aperture proved to be too narrow to allow an adult person to crawl through and the attempt had to be abandoned.

There now remained only one avenue to be explored — seeking out Grima's last will in the hope that it might decide the issue. A search in the Notarial Archives revealed that M.A. Grima drew up his will and a codicil on the 20th and 21st August 1798 respectively. At last my persistence was amply rewarded for among other provisions the testator expressly declared that he wanted "his body to be interred in the church of the Friars of St. Francis... in the sepulture of the Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix" (Ms. 51/690). My task was over. The weight of evidence I have collected points unmistakably to the conclusion that M.A. Grima is buried in the crypt of the Archconfraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix in the Chapel of the same name which lies on your right immediately as you enter the Church of the Minor Observants of St. Francis in St. John Street, Valletta.

A colleague who got to know about my quest asked: "But why all this bother to locate Grima's last resting place?" I replied: "First of all because being burdened with an obsessive frame of mind I cannot rest until I have pursued all possible avenues leading to the resolution of an unsolved problem; secondly because Grima was an individual of high stature and, therefore, deserved being followed to his tomb; and lastly because if you are

in the habit of commun'g, as I do, with those precursors who endeavoured to light the obscure pathways of medical knowledge for their successors, you will know where to hold thyself with the most outstanding exponent of Maltese surgery in the eighteenth century.

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